

# A Volunteer in Israel

By Ron Tolin  
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I recently returned from an adventure in Israel where I spent 2 weeks working side by side with Israelis and living on an Army base somewhere in the southern part of Israel. I say somewhere because of the security the IDF (Israel Defense Force) maintains. We didn't find out where our assignment was until we were ready to board the bus that transported about 50 volunteers to 3 separate bases. Our base was located in the Negav near Beersheva. We volunteered to perform non-combat duties that would not have to be done by Israeli soldiers such as working in the kitchen, packing equipment bags in the warehouse, taking inventory and other menial tasks which saved the army a great deal of money by not having to pay reservists to come in and work on their off time. It was made clear to that we were ON an IDF base, not IN or WITH the IDF.

Our typical day began with breakfast at 7:30, a short briefing of the news of the day from around the world at 8:15 and flag raising at 8:30. Our group of volunteers consisted of 2 young women in their 20's (I used to be much better at guessing ages so I hope I don't offend anyone) and 9 men ranging in age from mid-50's to early 70's. We started our tasks at 8:45 and worked until noon when we had a few minutes to wash and freshen up before lunch. Work began again around 1:30 until 5:00. Dinner began at 7:30pm and at 8:30, our group had an evening activity. We learned about the country and its citizens, picked up some Hebrew words and expressions and played some word and mind games. It was fun, educational and helped us to bond with each other.

I kept a daily log of our activities and took lots of pictures which I turned into a 17 minute video of my trip to Israel with "Sar-El", a nonprofit Israeli organization that coordinates our presence in Israel. They work closely with "Volunteers for Israel", the USA organization that runs the US part of the program. There were people from all parts of the world who volunteered. A few of the countries that I recall were the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Hungary and England. We had 3 volunteers from England in our group and it was fun to try and understand the differences in the 2 languages.

I left Boston on a Friday, my wife's birthday (she finally got over it), and flew to Toronto. We left Toronto ½ hour late and after 11 ½ flight we landed early at Ben Gurion Airport only to wait for an arrival gate to become available. It took about an hour to go through passport control and security. Since it was Shabbat, there were no busses or trains to take us to Tel Aviv center where Bill, my roommate, who is from Wells, Maine and I were to spend the night. We ended up taking a taxi with another Sar-El volunteer, Lee from Oklahoma who we met at the airport. Lee had been to Israel 2 times previously on trips sponsored by his church and decided to become a volunteer stemming from closeness toward the Israelis and Israel.

Lee rented an apartment for the night while Bill and I stayed at a Hostel 1 block from the beach. We three met up for dinner and in the pouring rain, accompanied by high winds, we walked to a local restaurant. The next morning, we managed to get to the train station via Sherut (a van which follows the same route as the busses). One stop on the train and we were at the airport where we waited for the rest of the volunteers to arrive. There were about 50 people who checked in with the group coordinator who checked our paperwork and assigned us to various bases. There was a group of volunteers from Hungary who remained together and went to a separate base than the rest of us who were split up between 2 bases in the Negav somewhere near Beer Sheva. We were assigned a Madricha, a young female soldier and a Madrichot, a young male soldier who were our guides and companions at the base. Our Madrichot was reassigned to another job after a few days leaving Adina as the sole caretaker of our closely knit group. We arrived at the base around noon, had lunch. Lunch is the big meal of the day, usually consisting of meat, vegetables and fruit. Breakfast and dinner were light meals of tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, potatoes, hummus, hard boiled and fried eggs. We immediately

prepared ourselves to star work and were issued uniforms consisting of a shirt, pants, belt and winter jacket. There were 3 sizes of uniforms; medium, large and extra large. If you were a small or a double extra-large, too bad.

The most recent military action near Gaza depleted the warehouse of certain equipment and items needed in the field such as duffle bags which consisted of uniforms, sleeping bags, accessory kits of helmets etc. Our job was to replenish and restock the warehouse by picking the items and stuffing the duffle bags which they call kit bags. I was told that this facility is the main supply base for the Negav area. We were instructed not to take pictures of anything with printing, license plates or if in question, ask for permission. There is to be no proselytizing or talking politics. Failure to adhere to these directives could mean expulsion from the program.



Monday morning was our official 1<sup>st</sup> day of work. We met for breakfast at 7:00am and found the mess hall in total darkness. There was a power outage which lasted for about ½ hour. As soon as we finished breakfast it started to rain heavily and the winds started to blow. Because of this bad weather, flag raising was cancelled. We started work filling duffle bags and took a lunch break at noon. After lunch we worked again until 5:00pm. We ate dinner at 6:30 and had an evening activity at 7:30. Our activity for this evening was a talk about the Israel Defense Force, the history, customs and ranks. The IDF was formed 2 weeks after Israel declared its independence on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948. This schedule was followed every day.

More rain and high winds on Tuesday. More duffle bags to pack. We work very hard but it's for a good cause. What we do relieves the military from this timely and important work. If we were not able to give our time and effort, they would have to hire reservist to come in on a daily basis which is extremely costly. I was told that it would cost about \$1,000 per day. The work is not difficult but is extremely physical.

My co-workers are a diverse group and include a commercial airline pilot, and agriculturist, director of a state EPA, state prosecutor, laboratory worker in the DNA field, part time magistrate, retired college professor; from Tennessee, Wisconsin, Georgia, Maine, Connecticut, New York, Texas, and 3 from England.

I left my smart phone at home, there was no scheduling that I had to think about other than meal times which all led to a stress free 2 week commitment. The food was not what I was used to eating but it wasn't too bad. Mostly tomatoes, cucumbers, humus, eggplant, sour cream, hard boiled and fried eggs, milk in a plastic bag, pudding and dry cereal. There is baker on our base, although I understand that some bases to have a baker. One day they heated up some frozen cinnamon rolls for us. What a treat because I love fresh baked goods and this was the closet we came.



For lunch today we had a base favorite, schnitzel. I never had eaten it before but it was actually very good; fried chicken in a batter. The soldiers loaded up their plates and kept coming back for more. Lunch is the big meal which always consisted of a meat dish alongside the vegetables. Breakfast and dinner always was vegetables and eggs. I got used to it. I remembered a famous saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." I was in Israel so I did what the Israelis did, eat vegetables and fruit.

I found the young Israeli's not particularly friendly or courteous. They always cut in front of you when in the food line, never with any kind of "excuse me." One female soldier accidently knocked over a chair in the dining hall and kept

walking. She looked at it on the floor and never stopped to pick it up. I did one extremely friendly soldier that I had the pleasure of sitting next to one day at lunch. He is an American in his early 20's who joined the IDF to get military experience. He wants to use this service on his resume to get a job in the security field.

Everyone in our group had to take a turn working in the kitchen for 1 day. One member of our group didn't enjoy this assignment as the regular kitchen crew spoke little English and they kept changing her tasks. Before she finished 1 job, they had her doing something else. The only discomfort I felt was seeing how the food was prepared and the sanitary conditions in the kitchen. More on the kitchen later.

Today my co-workers started to teach me how to count to 10 in Hebrew. I never paid close attention in Hebrew school as a kid so it was difficult for me to master. I did learn 1-4 in my 1<sup>st</sup> lesson. I'll probably forget it all by tomorrow.

There is no TV in our quarters, no newspapers either. I really don't miss what is going on in the other world. Each morning after flag raising and at night before our evening activity, our madricha reads us excerpts of the international headlines of the day. The most important news I was waiting to hear was the outcome of the Notre Dame/Alabama football game. My team lost!

Dinner tonight was the usual tomatoes, humus, cukes, fried eggs and a special treat of cinnamon buns (frozen and baked off). Our evening activity was a game of Israeli trivia, history, culture and general knowledge about Israel and the government. We were split up into 4 teams and my team lost. Oh well, tomorrow is another chance to do better. Lots of fun and comradery.

Wednesday is here and it's my turn to work in the kitchen. I reported to the head cook who didn't speak English, a good way to start the job as I spoke no Hebrew



except numbers 1-4, so I was assigned to Moishe, a young man in his 20's who showed me how to use the dicing machine. He taught me how to slice tomatoes and when I started to slice carrots, he was smart enough to take me off that job. I wasn't too coordinated and he didn't want me to cut my fingers. I excelled at peeling onions without tearing up. I couldn't wait to tell my wife

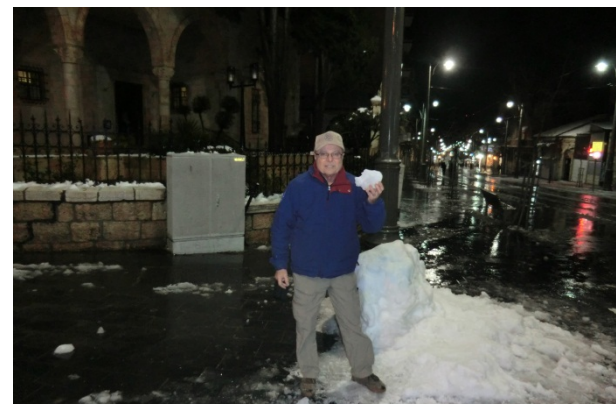


about the onions when she called me that afternoon. We talked every afternoon

at 1pm Israeli time which was 7am at home. By her calling me from her cell phone to my Israel cell phone, it was a free call for me and a small charge for her.

At lunch, I found out that Jerusalem had 4" of snow. This is highly unusual as I was told that this happens maybe every 20 years. I'm not sure if this is correct, only reporting what was told to me. After I finished my vegetables, I reported back to finish my obligation in the kitchen. I diced, chopped and diced potatoes. The kitchen is isolated from the outside so I didn't realize that there was a hail storm. Makes sense as we are about 1.5 hours from snowy Jerusalem.

Tomorrow is Thursday, we work ½ day and then are bussed to the Tel Aviv Central Bus station ( 6 floors of shops and stores where you could buy anything imaginable and then get lost) as we have the weekend off.



Shabbat is a time to be with friends and family and no work. My travel buddy, Bill from Maine and I took a bus to Jerusalem where we checked into a hostel. It was a great experience, we had a private room and bath rather than sharing a dormitory room with multiple mixed (guys and gals) hostellers. We were met by snow and slushy streets and because of this unusual weather, we didn't have to pay to take the train to our hostel: free when it snows in Jerusalem. Dinner was at a grille which specialized in falafels. Since I never had one before, I was advised to order it loaded, which I did. Not bbaaaadd tasting.

Friday morning we arose early and walked 20 minutes to the old city and the Western Wall/Kotel. I said a few prayers at the wall, reflected on my time in Israel and took it all in. What an experience. It was now time to shop. I had to get finished before Shabbat. I did and we headed back to the hostel where we



volunteered (once a volunteer, always a volunteer) to help prepare Shabbat dinner. I used my experience in the mess hall kitchen in the hostel kitchen by chopping, slicing

and dicing the usual vegetables. No onions this time. Bill volunteered to light the candles and lead us in the Brucha (blessing) over the wine and challah. About 50 hostel guests sat down to eat, and there was a friendly conversation with our new friends. There were a lot of non-Jews at our table so we answered their questions about Shabbat as best as we could

After breakfast on Shabbat, Bill and I walked back to the Kotel and became part of a prayer service of approximately 25 men led by Rabbi Mordecai (his last name escapes me at this moment). After the service, he invited us all to a Kiddush outside the service area and we were joined by the women who had been praying on the other side of the mechitza (separation used to divide the men and women). We were again invited (in Hebrew and in English) to walk with the Rabbi to his home to pray and eat a Shabbat dinner. There were about 12 men and women who walked 45 minutes up hills and crossing roads and highways. When we arrived, there were 40 more men and women waiting outside his Shabbat doorway. We entered, took our seats in a crowded living room /dining room / hallway and he started the service. We sang, davened (prayed) listened to and participated by discussing the Torah Parshat (weekly Torah portion) which he brilliantly taught in both English and Hebrew. After eating, I felt it was time to leave as this was a new experience for me and too much at one time might take away some of the feelings that I felt. E walked back to our hostel and estimated that we had walked 10-12 miles today.

Sunday morning, up at 6am, breakfast and a Sherut to Tel Aviv to meet the rest of our Sar-El volunteers at McDonald's in the bus terminal. The "Sherut" is one of the best transportation options in Tel Aviv. You pay about what you would pay on the bus but can ask to be let off wherever you like, as if you were in a taxi. We arrived back at the base in time for lunch and then it was back to work in the warehouse. Monday, more of the same and then comes Tuesday where we all (volunteers from 3 IDF bases) went on a tour of a Bedouin village, were invited into a tent and drank tea with our Bedouin host. We visited Kibbutz Yad Mordecai, we were given a lecture and saw exhibits from before the Holocaust through the establishment of the State of Israel. The kibbutz was founded in 1930 by immigrants from Poland and in the 1948 Arab-Israel war, they defended the kibbutz from the Egyptian Army who were on their way to Tel Aviv; thinking that they would overtake the Kibbutz in a matter of hours, it took days before they were held off and finally retreated. We saw a detailed model of the Warsaw Ghetto and a film depicting the struggle and battle against the Nazi's.

Thursday was the last day for 3 of our group as we only signed up for a 2 week stint on the base. We were bussed to Tel Aviv along with those who were staying for a third week but had to leave the base for Shabbat. Another volunteer and

myself spent the day touring Tel Aviv and Yafo. Would you believe that our last day in Israel, the temperature was 70 degrees and full sun. We ate lunch on the beach and took in all the wonders of Israel and her people. Our flights were scheduled to leave at 10:30 and 11:30 respectively so we left Tel Aviv in plenty of time to get to the airport and have dinner. When I disembarked from the plane, I had the best surprise ever; my wife was there waiting for me as I entered the terminal.

This trip was quite an experience. Every day I had the best feeling to be able to help out and work alongside our Israeli brothers and sisters. I learned a more about the people, customs, culture and the ongoing fight for freedom and peace; also a few Hebrew words, phrases and numbers. I hope to have the opportunity to return to Israel in the future and volunteer again.