

Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue: My Experience on Alternative Break Israel
By Dasi Fruchter

On the day our trip was to leave, the parents of the participants of Alternative Break Israel flocked around the staff, flinging questions and emergency contact information urgently in their direction. That very morning, Israel had begun its offensive against Gaza, and parents were anxious for the safety of their children as they entered an apparent war zone. As the staff, (no doubt with sweaty palms), reassured the nervous parents, I only nursed slight reservations about hopping on a plane towards the developing war. I kissed my parents goodbye in the midst of the chaotic airport, and thought little of the war, excitedly anticipating the volunteer work I would complete, the people I would form connections with, and the country I was excited to return to.

I learned about Alternative Break Israel through the Queens College Hillel. The trip, heavily subsidized by UJA, was designed for 42 students from New York area universities. We were to participate in seven days of hands-on service opportunities that would expose us to socio-economic and social justice issues in Israel. We were meant to take the values we learned back to campus, and create social justice initiatives in our communities. Above all, we were to explore social justice as a Jewish value. I thought perhaps the situation of increased security would limit our ability to learn the most we possibly could about *tzedek* (justice), but in retrospect I understand that the great success of the trip was very much dictated by the way the war influenced the participants. I felt that through my trip, a trip focused primarily on *tzedek*, I had a particularly unique and powerful experience.

While working on our various volunteer initiatives, I often forgot that the country was at battle. For the most part, the people we worked with carried on their everyday lives. There were other times, however, when the war was palpable. While on the bus in between volunteer projects, the boisterous chatter of college students would regularly reduce to a hush as the news came on. While our group cleaned out a used clothing warehouse in the north, nationalistic and military songs crackled out constantly over the small radio. Numerous participants, myself included, would slink off often to call their friends and relatives on army bases that were waiting to go into combat. We worried often, and the trip took on a somber tone.

As we continued to volunteer and reflect about social justice awareness, I grappled with the word we threw around so often on our trip- *tzedek*- so vaguely defined as "justice". Being in a Jewish country at a time of war gave us no option but to consider difficult issues of Judaism and social responsibility. Our unique thematic focus caused us to directly face the issues of social justice involved in a war. Having come not as tourists, but as workers and observers from various Jewish backgrounds, each of us had a heightened sensitivity for the way people reacted to and spoke about the war. Removed from the media battle and placed into a very real context, we considered various issues from all perspectives.

With these issues constantly on my mind, I was more perceptive of the fact that during wartime, Israelis seemed to be particularly enthusiastic about pursuing *tzedek* in their everyday lives. Jews often respond to tragedy and difficult times by

contributing positively to society, and I was not surprised by the overwhelming drive of many to do good during those days. At that time, I felt especially proud to be working with the elite of Israel's social justice infrastructure. We saw those passionate about social action programs for youth, who worked in refugee centers in southern Tel Aviv, who directed teen centers for new immigrants, and who spearheaded organizations that provide legal services to migrant workers.

While there are many issues of social justice to discuss, they become even more complicated in the context of war. These new issues were not ones the trip coordinators or the participants were prepared to deal with, but nevertheless, we found ourselves discussing *tzedek* on the bus, over hummus and veggies at breakfast, and even while spackling walls to prepare them for paint. As we painted homes in underprivileged communities, it occurred to me that instead of philosophizing about pursuing justice, we were actively doing it. **Inspired, my peers and I planned to introduce new social action initiatives on our Queens College campus upon our return.**

Many of us extended our tickets, and found ourselves seeking out additional volunteer opportunities. I discovered, like many of my Israeli friends, that contributing to a positive cause is the best way to respond in wartime.

With God's help, the wars will end soon. What will never end though, is the Jewish pursuit of justice. It colors the words of our Torah, our tradition, and our rituals. I sincerely hope that UJA continues providing students with the gift of gaining the complex perspective of social action in a completely Jewish context.