

Good morning David and Khalto Ghoufran,

I hope this email finds you well. I apologize for the serious delay of reaching out and I know this is very long overdue. I started drafting this message in the beginning of May 2022 however, I have been dedicating much of my time to my studies, as I am attempting to graduate a year earlier than my expected date. Although I am not the strongest writer, I am excited and honored to share my experiences with you. Be prepared, this will be a long message as I will be recollecting my visit to Falastin for the first time in 12 years.

Meeting you, David and Khalto Ghoufran for the first time at Pistachio, was such an honor and blessing in disguise. I really enjoyed learning more about TOLEF and what your work in Palestine was like! The timing of this trip was near perfect: my workload at college was not overbearing, and I knew I could not pass up such an opportunity! When the trip was confirmed, I was so nervous since I did not know what to expect from those 10 days. Regardless, I came in with an open mind to learn mostly for the honor of my heritage.

Prior to this trip, I was confident that I had an understanding of the situation of the land. I knew a bit of history from my family and childhood, so I understood how things came to be. But I overestimated my knowledge as soon as we arrived at the airport. I immediately noticed the discrimination, but I knew the experience would be different for a traveler who does not understand what is truly happening behind the scenes. I was astonished by the xenophobia amongst religions and ethnicities, and when physically there it was immediately apparent. I did not realize the truth of these experiences back home in the U.S. I have heard from a few that "you have to see it to believe it". I did not understand this until I arrived and witnessed the Israel government's propaganda through the advertisements on the terminal walls, commercials on tvs, and on billboard signs with messages describing their military's honor. They were able to create an entire narrative that is nowhere near the truth.

Events at Airport:

As we were exiting the plane and entering the airport, I honestly believed that I was able to walk right through security without question. I considered that since I have an American passport it would be a benefit. The Tel Aviv airport has face recognition technology for your passports, and I happened to be unlucky as mine did not work. This is where I had to speak to passport control and then sent shortly after to the waiting room.

I was unaware of the intensity of discrimination to Palestinian Americans at passport control, it was heartbreaking. I feel appreciative and thankful, especially to my parents, for working so

hard so that I would have the opportunity to visit the part of the land that many Palestinians and even Palestinian-Americans cannot visit due to the laws in-place by Israel's control.

Something I never shared with you all was that during my interaction with passport control in private, they repeated the question "What are my intentions for traveling here?" a few times, even though they already received a detailed "itinerary" and explanation from Susan. It was in an aggressive manner, almost as if they were pressuring me to admit I was guilty of something. I made it very clear that I wanted to see the holy sites, but they could not take it as an answer. A lot of the "safety" questions were not typical passport security questions yet rather invasive and unnecessarily intense.

I bottled up any feelings I had inside and answered each question light-heartedly and all smiley. The second they gave me the visa, I returned to Susan, and when we left the area I was visibly upset. Despite the fact that I was an American tourist, they knew to treat me a certain way with the intention that I will not return again, because of my identity. (Don't worry though, I won't give up that easily!).

It was even worse to hear that I got the lucky-end of the situation because I was in a tour group. I remember in the waiting-area we were sitting alongside a Muslim, he was wearing a taqiyah, so it was apparent what his religion was. According to his account, he was waiting there for the whole day and we were able to leave before him. I called my mother immediately after the questioning and her reaction was very funny. I told her they took me in for questions for maybe an hour or two at most and she laughed so much saying "Wow you are not stubborn enough, they held me in for 8 hours the last time I came to see my family." This changed my perspective at a snap of the finger; it made me feel lucky rather than angry. At that moment I realized that each day all types of people at the airport deal with this circumstance, but how was it not publicized enough? When we left the airport, and drove to East Jerusalem, I realized it was the first time ever in my life I have seen the land outside of the West Bank and I was even more stunned.

The ride from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem felt too short after we left the airport. You can see acres of olive trees along the highway and bright green mountains and valleys in the distance. The weather was sunny but the wind was only mild. It looked like something out of a movie. Not only did I fall in love with the land, but it opened my eyes to things I was never really aware of previously.

It was my first time seeing Israeli settlements— so I instantly thought of the Nakba. In the US, we are exposed to a certain story by the media that does not represent the truth. Yet, it is run by

a hierarchy that manipulates the news with lies because they would rather side with oppressors and not the oppressed. They use terms like “conflict” and “war” to level out the playing field between the two different sides. However, the truth of the matter is that in areas of settlements, there are not any remains of the Palestinian people although it was once their land before they were exiled out.

Jerusalem:

As someone who is interested in social history, a goal of mine for when I am older is to learn the true lineage, and genealogy in the places I visit. Walking down the Old City of Jerusalem, it is amazing to see the shift of culture when you walk down a couple cobblestone streets. From Armenian, to Muslim, to Christianity and Judaism, all of the quarters have their own character and history to it.



Joel Carmel, from Breaking The Silence, was my favorite speaker in Jerusalem. It was amazing to meet someone from a different background and still try to make a change of the occupation. It is beyond astonishing to me to meet someone who once served in the Israeli Defense Force and who grew up in a Jewish Orthodox family. Despite his identifying background, he was very vulnerable and emotional to what the IDF is doing and it makes him more humane. I recall the story that Joel told on how he realized the harm the government is doing to the Palestinian people and the wrongdoings of the apartheid.

Bethlehem:

As we arrived at the Tent of Nations, we all gathered underground in a meeting cave with beautiful paintings and greetings written on the rocks in various languages. When Dawud introduced himself and his land, he described how the IDF burnt hundreds of his olive trees and they attempted to buy off his property for thousands of dollars, he continuously says no because it is his homeland. No matter how much money they would give him, he would never say yes to the offer. Money is not a driving force for him, especially as his trees are a part of his own identity. He used the Arabic word Somoud, which translates into steadfastness, perseverance, and resilience. Despite the threats, offers, and constant visits, the perseverance that shines through Dawud's family is an example of Palestinian resilience. The date of the Nakba happened nearly 75 years ago (still going) and so much has changed within those years. The people of Palestine are called resilient for this, but most feel like they do not have a choice. Today in America, the concept of somoud denotes unity and gathering of the people seeking to preserve the identity, culture, and characteristics of Palestine.



Over the years it has reminded me how precious each moment is and the importance of family, friends and visitors. The chance to visit the Dehaisha Camp and have dinner with families in the refugee camp made me see the hospitality like no other. It is a unique and unforgettable experience that allows visitors to discover Palestinian culture, traditions, customs, and daily life. Moreover, it is a fantastic opportunity thanks to the incredible, and often overwhelming generosity and hospitality of the families that represent the Palestinian people. Jawahir and I had the honor to meet with a sophomore in high school named Zuhra, her family fed us musakhan and harissa for dessert, which other than my mother's, was the best harissa I've ever had.

We got to listen to her family (her intermediate family and some of her cousins) share stories of their upbringings. All of her family members are ambitious, hard-working, and want to share their culture to others so Palestine will never be forgotten. It was amazing to hear that Zuhra and her classmates will be traveling to places in the United States to perform their dabke routine. Zuhra's father, Mazen, is actually a previous member of the Parents Circle and did many tours across the world and the United States. His perspective of being a part of the organization demonstrates that he wants everyone to come together in peace.

Al-Khalil:

Arriving at Hebron there was more heartbreak and anger. I first noticed how the children followed tourists around to bring money home to their families, when at their age they should be at school getting their basic education needs. My parents immigrating to the USA gave me the opportunities that were taken away from the children in Hebron, where they are deprived of their basic human rights. It made me frustrated because the conditions would have not been like this if it were not for the invasion of the land, similar to the circumstances in Ukraine and Xinjiang, China. Palestinian homes are destroyed and Israeli settlements are present. However, even though the land is taken away, the culture, the identity, and the people of Palestine will never be ignored.



We were able to connect with the Community Peacemaker Team (CPT) and they had a presentation that was hosted by students who were in high school and college, which was very admirable. CPT is doing everything possible to document and publicize IDF's damages and attacks through social media like Instagram. A story that I recall is how the IDF made the main street completely illegal for the Palestinians to enter and exit (even though it goes directly through the center of Hebron). One person stated that their normal commute which would take 10 min changed into an hour once this rule was implemented. This shows how the IDF is doing everything in their power to strip the land apart and make it impossible to have a daily routine as a Palestinian. We had the experience of seeing that very same road when we were trying to get

to our tour bus. As we attempted to walk on that street, our group was instantly pushed away primarily for our looks, despite us having American passports, and it just shows the apparent discrimination that Israel teaches their soldiers.

As a Muslim, I was honored to visit the Ibrahimi Mosque next. We arrived at the pedestrian checkpoint and it was one of the most intense we experienced thus far. Since this is a holy site in both Islam and Judaism, the military immediately asks you if you are Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. They will lead you one way if you identify as Jewish and then take you another way if you say Muslim. I then discovered that the tomb of Prophet Ibrahim (Peace be Upon Him) is in between a synagogue and a mosque, which in itself is a symbolism of the divide amongst the people.

The Palestinian resilience is truly commendable to an outsider. The Saladin Soup Kitchen is one small example of this. During the holy month of Ramadan, they feed 8,000 to 12,000 people. This could be a reason why the city is known as “the place where no one sleeps hungry”.

The same evening we had a tour of the Smart University. The technology in the school exceeded my expectations and is significantly better than some universities and parts of UConn. There are various different divisions that students can enroll in, such as culinary, hairdressing school, business management and so much more. It was very nice to meet so many different people my age and to hear what their dreams are in the future. Insha Allah, this can increase the amount of opportunities for people in Hebron.

Al-Naqab:

Khalto Ghoufran can predict that going to the Naqab was one of my favorite moments because it was a very influential time that showcased Palestinian culture to its fullest extent. Our first stop after a long bus ride was going to visit a woman named Amal, where she frequently hosts the community in the hot weather in a large tent. Through this, I developed my love of tatreez, and I am currently learning how to stitch the patterns myself. It was a great experience to learn more about the Bedouins and their lifestyle. The practice of tatreez originated in Palestine over 3,000 years ago. It is a unique form of embroidery that brings together colored threads in various patterns to create traditional designs that vary from region to region. For example, the Bedouin style tatreez includes intricate patterns and often includes red and various different colors.



After, we met Khalil Alamour who is truly inspiring. I have never met anyone who is as resourceful as he is. His various projects in his home and village to protect his family demonstrates his strength and courage. He always had a detailed plan for the village and had alternative solutions for water, food, and so much more which are basic necessities they do not even have access to, as the government (especially as his village is an unregistered area).

Jericho/Ariha:

It was a pleasant surprise to visit the Dead Sea for a day! It made me smile to see that there are Palestinian businesses selling various products in the city. Many of them owned skincare businesses, which advertised the benefits of the mud from the sea. I had a brief encounter with one of the store's managers, I believe his name was Abdullah, and he gave me a few camel keychains after I had a conversation with him about me visiting my family. His hospitality was beyond what words can describe.



Akkah:

My mother told me that she has always wanted to go to Akkah to see the Mediterranean Sea for the first time, so it was such an enjoyable experience for me to go and see a part of my mother's heart. The boat ride was very calming, fun, and a great way to listen to different Arabic music (my dancing skills were put to the test). I remember the time where we all had dinner together and ice cream, we all had fun together just like a family would. I thought it was so fascinating that one restaurant could have both a Hebrew and Arabic sign on it- which is a sign of both unity and tragedy.

**Reflections:**

Something I wanted to reflect in this message is what we spoke about in our initial meeting at the Palestinian Museum. I remember David's question about the holy land: "Is it a promised land or land of promise?" and after all the amazing things we learned from the perspectives of so many people I am able to reflect upon this.

The holy land is the land of promise and also a land of hope. Through the chaos, catastrophe, and fights that occurred if there is one thing I noticed it is the hospitality and kindness the Palestinians have and their determination to never give up. Because the country has been through so much over the years, it has reminded its people how precious each moment is and the importance of family and friends. You will never know when those moments could be taken away, and they are navigating to find the promise and are hopeful towards the future.

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Deepest Gratitude:

Additionally, I cannot thank you enough for providing the opportunity to reconnect with my village. I cannot imagine the rescheduling and planning you must have done to make it possible. I am so touched by your kindness and I am so honored that you believed in me. I hope the travelers had a good time as well.

I was so grateful that I got to share my village with everyone and the rest of the group. To me, it is truly spectacular and nothing like no other. Similarly to the start of the journey, I was also unsure of what to expect, but I was very happy that multiple people appeared at the town hall to send all of us greetings. On the other tour days we would talk to local Palestinians and I would speak with my very broken Arabic– people did not think I was Palestinian, let alone Arab. From my appearance and the way I dress, they would ask if I am from South Asian or Hispanic countries. For a small tiny moment, I thought that I would not fit in no matter how hard I tried and I felt a little bit hopeless for not being American nor Arab enough.

However, when we went to Anza, an elderly man exclaimed “She is one of us!” as soon as I got off the bus, which made me feel really happy. My family is not in close contact with my family back at home, so I did not expect them to know what I looked like. The fact they knew right away who I was, made me connect even stronger to my own identity.



Anza is a quiet, peaceful community. It consists of only a couple of streets, but is surrounded by olive orchards and tucked away amidst the abundance of green-covered mountains. My cousins reshowed me all of my family member’s homes. There was a whole variety of plantations that you cannot see in the city areas: cacti, fig trees, lemon trees, and orange trees. Going back to see my family and village was everything I imagined and so much more. I really had a sense of fulfillment and gratitude.

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Although I did not recap them all, the most memorable moments were hearing the different stories of people from various backgrounds. They all share one commonality, which is having hope and never giving up no matter what the circumstances may be. It gave me an indescribable strength which made me realize that I can do whatever I put my mind to. I plan to share these stories and my culture to those in the U.S.. If I can get people to listen (in a peaceful atmosphere with no protesting or verbal offenses), I hope that they listen sincerely and feel the same emotions I felt from the journey and that their perspectives have changed, even if it is only a little.

Thank you so much again, I would really like to get in touch soon. Words cannot describe how much gratitude I have to you, David and Khalto Ghoufran, and everyone who made this trip possible.

Sincerely,
Norah