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Young American Jew works for Palestinian justice



In Chicago, Daniel joins a protest outside the annual fundraiser of the Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces, Oct. 2012.

Photo: SJ Rhee/Chicago Indymedia

No one would say it's easy to question beliefs you have held your whole life.

For Daniel Kaplan, an American Jew who organizes college students in a national campaign to pressure divestment from corporations that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestine, answering these questions honestly meant reconciling a deep sense of justice with an equally deep sense of himself.

Daniel grew up in a liberal Jewish community in the Chicago area that taught him that Jews' struggles with persecution compel them to stand up for others who are oppressed and persecuted.

When he entered college in the Pacific Northwest, "I was unabashedly pro-Israel," he says. He studied abroad in Jordan, where nearly everyone he met was a displaced Palestinian. His 2008 trip to Israel – sponsored by Birthright Israel with a message that "this land is 'for you'" – coincided with the nation's assault on Gaza. As a Jew, he felt implicated in the conflict.

"Those experiences weighed on me during the rest of my time in college," he says. "I wanted to go back and see the area again with my newfound perspective." So after graduation, Daniel enrolled in an Arabic language school in Jordan, where he also volunteered with a few nonprofits. He moved to East Jerusalem and traveled throughout the West Bank.

Daniel's time on the ground was a crash course in the realities of daily life for both Israelis and Palestinians, and he took that opportunity to heart.

He struggled to explain his newfound empathy for Palestinians to his Israeli cousins, for whom Gaza is a security threat, not a humanitarian crisis.

"People in Israel do fear for their lives," says Daniel, "and that fear drives their security perspective."

He recounts a bus bombing during his first week in Jerusalem that targeted Israelis, and how he felt relieved the next day when he saw that someone with a uniform was on the bus he boarded. "I understand how people come to develop the world views they have when they experience acts of violence but don't ... have access to witnessing how Palestinians are oppressed or what they go through," he says.

But as he heard stories from his Palestinian neighbors about living every day in fear, attended weekly nonviolent demonstrations in the West Bank, and witnessed the denial of Palestinians' basic human rights, he kept coming back to what he had learned growing up. "My Jewish values compelled me to be invested in this," he says.

When Daniel returned to the U.S. early in 2012, he was somewhat burnt out by the tensions in the Middle East, but inspired by the resilience of the people he had met. He wanted to support them from the U.S., but to do so without distracting from what's important: securing a just peace that includes rights for Palestinians.

In Chicago, he has embraced his role as a solidarity activist. To him, this means "making sure we allow the oppressed to voice their struggle for themselves," rather than focusing on solidarity activists not personally struggling with oppression. The coalitions he has joined in Chicago are very self-aware – there's a clear concern for keeping Palestinian voices in the forefront of the movement, and for being inclusive and anti-racist.

Online communication facilitates these facets of the movement. "Activists in this country have the opportunity to not just speak on behalf of people in the Middle East, but directly connect them to Americans through the Internet," he says. "Palestinians, Israelis...everyone has a better awareness of tactics and principles that should guide the struggle for justice."



Watch: Daniel talks about why he works with AFSC.

Video: Jon Krieg/AFSC

If you don't see a video above, please refresh the page.

This year, through a fellowship with the American Friends Service Committee's Middle East program, Daniel is building a more diverse and inclusive community of activists in Chicago and nationally. A major focus of that work is the We Divest campaign, which asks TIAA-CREF to divest from corporations that fund and profit from the Israeli military occupation.

He says that the concreteness of divestment projects is exciting because it's a clear way to make an impact on ending human rights abuses. "It seems entirely possible to get TIAA-CREF to divest from the occupation, and that divestment could make a real and significant impact on how the occupation functions and exists," he says.

Daniel sees an increase of allies within the Jewish community and in the general public. "Palestinian rights activists are often seen as misguided, incredibly radical – associated with violence or anti-Semitism. That perception is starting to change and people are starting to hear us out," he says. "It gives me hope that the movement will become more main-stream."

As for him, being involved in the Israel-Palestine struggle is not a choice. "My identity as a Jew makes me inseparable from it. I'm going to be part of it whether I want to be or not," he says. The choice he has made is working in solidarity with Palestinians.

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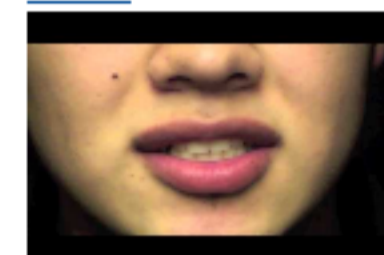
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