Leila laughs through a haze of shisha and the sun sets over Bethlehem behind her. It is the last week of my internship with the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, and I have left Jerusalem for Bethlehem, to have dinner with an old friend from Seeds of Peace.

Leila is in college now, studying law, so we discuss justice. She tells me the only justice she will ever feel is if Palestine becomes one again, for all Israelis to be expelled. I ask her if she sees this as possible. She tells me she only sees death and destruction of the West Bank and Gaza to be possible. We watch the sunset and smoke shisha and watch beautiful men with their beautiful wives eat dinner and be in love.

She says, “Remember those dialogues? They were a disrespect to my identity. But I got to travel.” She takes me to the center of town in Bethlehem, to the shared taxis. She lifts her chin as if in challenge. “Can you get home ok from here?” I nod confidently. I’ve been through checkpoints and changing buses and haggling prices late at night before.

I have been a “Seed of Peace” for seven years. I spent four years of high school as part of the youth peace-building program, Seeds of Peace International, gifting me the opportunity to know Israelis, Palestinians, and a further diversity of fellow Americans. During summers, we gathered in Otisfield, Maine with young people from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, the U.S., and the U.K. to meet those “other” from us. With the summer camp located in my home state, I joined other Seeds from Maine during my academic semesters, to organize around issues relevant to our communities, such as race, gender, and education.

This past summer, I traveled to Jerusalem where I was both removed from and caught between identities of this conflict that I was seeing in person for the first time. Neither Jewish, Muslim, Palestinian, nor Israeli, I was an American with no personal connection to organized religion or the Middle East region – an outsider to dialogues on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as I was to the region. In those dialogues during my high school Seeds of Peace experience, I was grateful for the opportunity to form bonds and gain understanding from both sides. Now, as I began my summer, the nuance within those dialogue experiences forced me to hold a collection of difficult and often conflicting truths as I witnessed this conflict from both sides of the Separation Wall.

The Chorus
On my first Thursday in Jerusalem, I arrived at the Jerusalem International YMCA. A mighty building, I had seen the heights of its frame five minutes

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Author’s Note: Some names mentioned in this essay have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Some of the facts, locations, and events have been slightly altered in a way that does not change their significance or value, but which shields the participants from having others recognize the events as ones involving specific people. I hope the essay, published, will have as much value for readers as the summer in Israel/Palestine did for me.
Those at this meal were part of something that could never be my community, and I felt grateful to bask in the warmth of all that this chorus was, to be enriched by this splendor. Was this part of the dream I had first heard at Seeds of Peace, years before?

out along Ben Yehuda Street. The clock tower seemed to look upon all of Jerusalem, East and West. Its front gates were open, like wings. Professionals in black suits and airy blouses glided past me and up the staircase to main and side entrances. The canvas of a banner announcing an upcoming cultural event flapped in the wind of mid-morning. Birds chirped. A small cat darted past my feet.

With its formidable columns, manicured lawn, and symmetrical domes of tan stone, the building seemed to have always been there. I walked by potted plants in the middle of the main pavilion and towards a message framed in blue tile, hugged by a set of modest staircases, to the main entrance of the building. As I moved closer, past an out-of-use water fountain, and along the terrace, I noticed carvings of ferns and birds enshrined on the outer walls, then a pelican, and a dove – symbols of the three Abrahamic religious traditions. Trees lined the walkway, pillars supported the building, birds embossed its exterior. And some of the central, exterior wall along the entire front of the YMCA, tan and formidable too, was torn through by bullet holes.

The message was written in delicate black ink, in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. I entered the building with the quote tucked tightly within the ventricles of my own heart: “Here is a place whose atmosphere is peace, where political and religious jealousies can be forgotten, and international unity fostered and developed.” – Lord Edmund Allenby, April 18, 1933.

On entering the building, I was directly below the expansive clock tower, going into the main hall of the YMCA. Within the intricate body of this building, painted strokes of deep blue and gold flowers lined the main hall like veins. They were the muscle and bone of the main hall, a subdued ecology beckoning tourists and peacemakers alike. This would be the site of my work for the next eight weeks with the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, where music and complexity would meet to teach me another lesson in the reality of conflict, and the beauty of people.

In the first weeks of my internship, I worked on management, programming and organizing spreadsheets, importing data, and scheduling video conferences with my boss, Micah Hendler, while he traveled in America. I watched as workers fluttered through the Y in urgency. I saw small groups of chorus members singing and working with one another, but I watched it while busy with my work and very much removed.

Finally, my boss returned from America, and the chorus members came to the YMCA to celebrate their reunion, at the close of Ramadan, over an iftar dinner. I entered the community meeting center to the smell of spiced chicken and fresh vegetables, saw smiling, laughing children and bright mango juice in wine glasses. There was an open seat towards the front of the room and I made my way to it. The room felt brighter than I had seen it before. Those at this meal were part of something that could never be my community, and I felt grateful to bask in the warmth of all that this chorus was, to be enriched by this splendor. Was this part of the dream I had first heard at Seeds of Peace, years before?

This and later meetings, formal and informal, were my collective chance to interrogate the inner workings of the chorus, to know if what I had read and written about the chorus in those first few weeks held truth. I heard beautiful voices working out of dusty rooms in the depths of the Y. I listened as Palestinian students told me of their excitement to travel beyond the West Bank, East Jerusalem, or sovereign Israel. I listened as Israeli students from liberal families spoke to me about the responsibility they felt for coexistence. Across separations of identity politics, there was, too, a genuine interest in choral work. In these snapshots, there are conflicts and questions, and beautiful, complicated music around sustainable truths of peace, and
To Palestine

One Friday, before the sun welcomed day, I boiled tea with spices found half-price at the Ben Yehuda Market. I washed my hair in the kitchen sink to shake out Dead Sea salt resting days too long. Later that morning, I would tremble with excitement as I began my first walk from West to East Jerusalem.

Israel regards Jerusalem as its capital, though this is not considered legally binding according to many interpretations of international law. Palestinians regard Jerusalem – Al-Quds in Arabic – as their capital, although many have no legal access to the city. There is no discernible line separating East from West Jerusalem, where one side is sovereign Israel and the other is not. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the West Bank, East Jerusalem (including the Old City), the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights, have been occupied by the State of Israel. Within all this complexity and drawing of legal boundaries, on the ground this means that in East Jerusalem, Israel maintains control of civil life, that the state provides for the municipal, health, and security functions of daily life.

Descending along the hill to Damascus Gate, I saw East Jerusalem spread out before me. Jerusalem stone of the Old City walls stood to my right, and shops seemed to collect more dirt and trash as I moved downward. The looks from beautiful brown eyes stuck to me like baby hairs on my sweating neck.

I walked quickly, late already. I didn’t have enough time not to know where to go, so I moved toward a group of men in all mute green, soft green, like America’s army green. The IDF was founded following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, so ordered by then-Defense and Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. The soldiers at this post, all men, were laughing together and rolling cigarettes. I said, “Excuse me, English?” One near me picked up his large, black gun, moved closer to me, and smiled, “Yes?” “Where is the bus to Ramallah?” He threw his wrist backwards, to the row of white buses behind him. I nodded and smiled with pink lips and white dimpled cheeks. He smiled back curiously, shaking his head slightly as if I had offered him a joke. I crossed the street near the soldiers, taking advantage of the brief break in mid-morning traffic at the Gate to avoid the bustle of the traffic circle farther ahead.

At the stop, it became clear that the soldier knew English, but not the West Bank. I looked into the sun for a sign on the platform listing “Ramallah.” There was no bus to Ramallah listed on the platform, and families looked suspiciously at me as I paced up and down the platform. My lack of Arabic or Hebrew prevented my speaking, in greeting or in asking a question. I approached East Jerusalemites with freckled cheeks and wrinkled features. Or were they settlers? Palestinians?

Sweat formed on the back of my neck as minutes shuffled by. A couple of older men smoked shisha by the entrance to the platform. I smelled the sweetness of its water-pipe and apple, lemony fragrance. Farther down the platform, two young men rolled tobacco into small shoots with white sheets and I stopped them, hopeful. They lit up their well-made cigarettes as they tried to decipher my question. I watched the tiny shoots burning low in East Jerusalem’s warm wind. The men spoke in slow, gravelly voices and broken English. It was then, in that mid-morning, that a young girl appeared. Perfect English sang to me, “You’re looking for the Ramallah bus?” I turned to answer affirmatively. A girl, short and thin, reaching not even to my breast, responded as I looked down. “It’s not
She asked question after question as we marched along the city streets: “What are you doing here?” “Who are you working for?” “Have you met a Palestinian before us?” “What do you think of international human rights?” “Can you describe the needs of the Palestinian people?”

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Arabic, the younger girl looked up at me during a crosswalk pause to say, “You are very pretty.” I pointed to her eyes reflecting light of all the suns I’d seen in this Jerusalem, saying, “Very pretty.”

There was God and fury thunder in nearly 16-year-old lungs, booming and assertive during the 15-minute-long walk, past shopkeepers and street beggars, and with input from her younger cousin who tagged along. Rawia was from Ramallah, but spent most of her summer days in East Jerusalem. It was clear she had a passion for reading. Rawia told me she wished to write books and teach. She couldn't wait for her chance to travel. I had met her as she had been sitting at the bus stop, watching her cousin and talking with friends. “There’s nothing to do in Ramallah,” she said certainly, wrinkling her nose. She translated to the cousin, who nodded vigorously in agreement, pigtails bouncing in time.

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The bus to the West Bank was air-conditioned and full of curious, staring women who looked quickly away as I returned their gazes. In 40 minutes, we reached Qalandia checkpoint and “the wall.” The West Bank “separation barrier” or “security fence” or “apartheid

“Take my picture American!” S.B. Warren, August 2016; Among a street midday in central Ramallah, called out to by man (left) to take a photo of him and his friend, allowing me to move closer and set focus on expressions of pride and joy.
As women and men re-boarded the bus following their walk through the checkpoint, we drove through the gates. I had arrived in Ramallah.

* * *

"Sophi-a," he sang at me across the bar, "You are being too accepting here. You heard me say I was not a feminist. This bothers you, correct? Then just say this. Your respect of my culture will be the death of you."

"I'm talking about a word. I'm bothered because you seem gleefully dismissive of the idea," I replied, shouting over the blaring Western beats of a Friday night in Palestine's New York, its Tel Aviv – Ramallah.

The bar boy, 18, but so joyful in the way he communicated with those asking him for a drink that he seemed younger, walked quickly from behind the bar to the table I was sitting at with three friends, all male.

“Sophie, I came from the womb of a woman, how could I not respect women? She gave birth to me, to my form and my soul. I think God is a woman. My mother raised me alone and I see Palestine, in a way, like a woman. When I fight the Palestinian force, I fight for her. Those commies. Women are better than me, and if we valued humanity differently, they would be ruling us all. And I know it’s not that way. But you’re talking that American stuff. And I think we’ve got it the worst. I see women working in the home here, but we’re all working behind a wall. Maybe I should have a priority [for liberating women], though I’d never call it feminism here. But what are those factions for, in this wasteland?"

All four men rolled cigarettes, and I turned my head away from the smoke, but that smell was Palestine. And I continued questioning, maybe two feet too deep in a cultural relativism that halts creation or resolution or revolution. And then the bar closed and we danced in the streets and went to our homes at 2 a.m. and this joy, I was learning, was also Palestine.

My friend and I laughed our way to his house outside downtown Ramallah, blocks away from the occupied metropolis’ Old City. His name was Mohammed, a handsome, boyish 20-year-old Gazan, who had lived in Ramallah for the past seven years. We shared stories in the street as we kicked pebbles and yawned our way towards his home. He pointed out the lights of Tel Aviv from the Ramallah street. Ramallah, resting on the crest of the Judean Hills at an elevation of 2,861 feet above sea level, gifts its inhabitants with cool summer breezes and has long been a popular tourist site. The low hum of streetlights and club music filled the air while we walked to his family’s apartment building.

From there, I entered the warmth of Palestinian hospitality, of Mohammed’s home. His parents were in the living room, and gave me dates and tea, handshakes and hugs. I met his mother, a science teacher, and her husband, a local government official. They were handsome people. I would later learn Mohammed’s mother veiled outside the home, where she wore bright, stylish scarves and pendants around a beautiful, wide and welcoming face, and smart pantsuits. His father looked the 60-something version of my friend Mohammed, large brown eyes and brows, a strong nose and jaw, highlighted by a full head of thick, graying hair. His mother entered the room again, this time with a sandwich of hummus, lettuce and a mix of herbal sauces and spices. She spoke in stilted English and we struggled to communicate, though a deep smile and hand to my heart, I was beginning to learn, would show an equal appreciation. She nodded and laughed at the gesture. And there was a family before me, laughing softly over the rumble of a Syrian television sitcom. I went to bed at 3:45 a.m., full in stomach and soul.
Mohammed’s mother made a full breakfast of hummus, yogurt, cooked vegetables, and elaborate dressings, offering Palestinian and Lebanese and Syrian dishes I could not pronounce. The family insisted I was served first and often, and given chocolate chip cookies at the end of the meal to take to the sitting room where my friend and his younger sister were watching “Game of Thrones.” Mohammed’s father sat at the same spot he had been the previous night, reading the newspaper and looking up occasionally to question what exactly they were watching and why. The sons grinned and laughed and periodically seemed to give context to a scene quickly in Arabic during commercials.

Later in the day, Mohammed’s father wanted to take me on a tour of Ramallah, so we piled into a long, black jeep. Mohammed’s father drove. The Mahmoud Darwish museum and garden and a Nelson Mandela statue, the wealth and poverty of inner and outer streets to the city, the offices of Mohammed’s father, the school where Mohammed’s mother had been educated, and the school where she now worked. “She came a long way to receive that education, and look what she does with it now!” said Mohammed’s father, slowing down so I could read the sign and take a picture of the school. Then, we began driving down a hill and up another nearby. We got out and they showed me the new property they had recently purchased, the view, the small garden, the stone of the patio. “For the future,” said Mohammed’s mother, smiling, and Mohammed’s father nodded.

We moved along a paved street towards the refugee camp. Mohammed’s father told me about growing up in a refugee camp similar to our destination. He talked about his family, about Gaza. He talked about the sea that the babies we would meet here had never seen, and about the education they didn’t receive but deserved. He explained that the slum of permanent structures had grown from a mere tent camp. We passed by the rusted gate of the entrance to the camp. Small children were running through the streets, our car rolling lightly on the uneven path strewn with trash. The streets were narrow, more so than even in Ramallah. I felt like I had entered a new Palestine, but familiar to me through his words, his pride, his love for these people.

On the outskirts of the camp, we found the road blocked. We stopped fully, and he pointed to the Israeli settlement resting on a neighboring hill. “Another world. See the soldiers there, with their guns? They decided to close this gate. Only them. And if we went through it, they would shoot at us. They have the freedom to control all of that,” Mohammed’s father spoke in earnest. The soldiers seemed to look in our direction, to our car. Mohammed’s father turned the engine over and the car around. My friend Mohammed said to me, “Now, it will take us 15 minutes or more to get to a place that should have taken us 15 seconds. Watch, time our movement.” It took longer than 15 minutes, as we puttered through the camp again and around the swirling hills outside Ramallah on our way to Jericho.

I ended up staying the weekend in Ramallah and returned to Jerusalem Sunday morning. I ate dates, and sat in coffee shops, and asked Mohammed’s father about his home and his work. He showed me pictures of himself with the home he designed in Gaza. He told me about the men he knew in power. He wore smart collared shirts every day, and took important phone calls for hours at a time all through the weekend. He sat forward on the
couch. “If you can devise a way forward on this ground, you will be able to analyze any conflict, in our past or in our future…. If you can understand this conflict, you can understand any conflict.” He talked about ending the occupation. “None of this ends, or really improves, before then. Before civil rights.” He was focused, and considerate to explain and flex his thoughts to an undergraduate student from America.

On my final morning with the family, we sat together after breakfast, drinking mango juice. He asked me what I thought of his wife. Then, he told me about his love for her. About how smart she was, to be able to make art with food and as a teacher for young students. How much he thought his children looked like her, and how he hoped they’d be like her. And, for the first time, I was not intimidated by him. He asked me about my own family and I told him how I missed them, and what they were like. “Just make sure as you do good, you love them well, too.” I hummed as I walked back to my campsite. I closed my eyes, thinking about what love looked like when acted upon.

To Tel Aviv
I took a public bus from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and spent one of my final weekends in the region with Noa, an Israeli friend through my Seeds of Peace experience. As we walked the streets of Tel Aviv catching up, I felt I had entered a different world from the one I had known from the previous weeks. Graffiti-lined buildings and sparkling cafes guided our path, as we spoke of who we had been, who we were at that moment, and who we hoped to be. Finally, I asked her about Seeds and she sighed deeply. “I got something from it all, you know?” And it felt a statement for me to fill in the blanks myself. She wasn’t going to tell me everything; we didn’t have that intimacy between us and she was only months from completing her two-year tour serving as part of the Israel Defense Forces. Later, she mentioned, “Those conversations you were a part of…. I made friends. Not that I’m legally allowed to keep them until September. …Hey, tell Khaled [a Palestinian Seed] I say hello?”

To Jerusalem
In conversations during my final two weeks, the high school students of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus spoke in Arabic and Hebrew, in cliques Palestinian and Israeli. There was rhythm to their collective voice when singing that lulled comfortably between songs. Whispers across rooms or laughter, or those that showed up an hour late to each rehearsal, their points of connection were also rich with culture and personalities larger than rooms. They switched heatedly between languages, explaining that their right to worship as they please rests heavily on the ability to move freely in their communities. They talked about Gazan friends or IDF soldiers, and about how geography affects access to education, as well as access to water. They were whole people, willing to share with me.

And in my final week, I saw the Jerusalem Youth Chorus perform for the first time. I was in the back with a video camera. These were, by then, lovely acquaintances. They started with the theme song of the Seeds of Peace International Camp, written on the benches at morning lineup at the campsite. I closed my eyes, full to the brim in momentary homecoming. I was in Maine again, years ago:

I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me, to see the beauty in the world through my own eyes.

You used to rock me in the cradle of your arms,
You said you’d hold me till the pains of life were gone.
You said you’d comfort me in times like these and now I need you.
Now I need you, and you are gone.

I think on the things that made me feel so wonderful when I was young.
I think on the things that made me laugh, made me dance, made me sing.
I think on the things that made me grow into a being full of pride.
I think on these things, for they are true.

I know a please a thank you and a smile will take me far,
I know that I am you and you are me and we are one,
I know that who I am is numbered in each grain of sand,
I know that I’ve been blessed again, and over again.

They were charming. The crowd smiled. And I hummed as I walked back to my hostel: I think on the things that made me feel so wonderful when I was young….

Conclusion
After working these months with Palestinian and Israeli youth, observing the conflict experienced by my childhood friends within their homes and grown lives, and the lives of those who make up their worlds, I have begun to know a deeper sense of understanding of and responsibility to this conflict and the essential nature of human rights.

In bearing witness to the structural imbalances that exist for Palestinians, and the reality of fear that persists for Israelis, I am humbled and sometimes
lost, without knowing where justice sits within these great divides.

But I spent the summer listening, and cultivating my own capacity for empathy, and I know great work remains urgently needed to find compromise for the sake of the lives of real and beautiful people with whom I shared conversations. The tensions I feel leave me conscious of the chorus’s reconciliatory quality. Music can heal and has the power to build. It cannot fix the frameworks of a decades-long conflict, and the pitfalls of all the coexistence work of which I have been grateful to be a part continue, often leaving me frustrated. Identity and narrative mosaic-ed my summer; Noa’s Israel and Leila’s Palestine, merging with the youth of the chorus, and of musicmakers and peacebuilders on the ground.

I am not this conflict’s keeper, but feel more than a passerby. The future is uncertain, and people continue to suffer over the realities I saw and heard of this past summer. And I think about Rawia’s questions.

Notes


3. The Jerusalem Youth Chorus: http://jerusalemyouthchorus.org/.


