

My Journey Through Israel: Promoting Wheelchair Basketball and Connecting with the Land of Israel

By: Jessica Hillier-Davidson

When I was chosen as a member of Maccabi USA's wheelchair basketball team for their inaugural Access Program, I was beyond ecstatic. I was honored to get the opportunity to represent my country and play amongst my fellow Jews. After the initial excitement wore off I was nervous, as the only female and one of the youngest members of the team, I worried I would not be able to connect or fit in with my teammates. These fears were quickly set aside the moment I met my fellow teammates at the airport in New York City. This group of people are some of the most welcoming, friendly, and joyful people I have ever met and we quickly formed a lifelong bond. Never in my life have I connected with a group of people as deeply or as rapidly as I did with these men. The thing I didn't take in to account when calculating my fears was our bond as a Jewish people. Our identity as Jewish athletes gave us an instant connection and deeper understanding of each other right off the bat which allowed us to connect all the more quickly. Previously I had spent a month in Israel, but this trip, the people I was able to meet, and the places we had access to made this, by far my most significant trip. If it wasn't for the generous donations of Temple Sinai and the members, none of this would have been possible so I would like to thank each and every one of you for this life changing experience.



One of the most meaningful experiences on the trip was volunteering with HaShomer HaChadash at a farm in Moshav Taoz. Today, numerous farmers remain vulnerable to agricultural crimes, including criminal and terrorist attacks on their fields and equipment. For the most part, farmers are left to fend for themselves despite their role in safeguarding Israel's open spaces and sovereignty creating a disconnect between the land and the people of Israel. Enter HaShomer HaChadash whose goal is to safeguard Israel's lands by engaging in agricultural and forestry work while helping to inspire mutual responsibility, civic courage, and strengthen connections to the land. We were lucky enough to be a part of this work by helping David at his family run farm, prune raspberries. Being able to assist someone in need and tending to the land, connected me with the land of Israel like never before. Being able to work on the Holy Land made it feel like I was not only a tourist, but a true part of everyday life in Israel. As a Jew, I have never felt more connected with the history of the land or with Hashem than when I was tending to these raspberries.



Trimming raspberries at David's Farm

One of the most unique experiences of my trip was getting to visit an air force base and watch the paratrooper training school exercises. We first got to hear about the paratrooper unit from one of the training school instructors, before going out and watching the different drills the soldiers are put through in order to prepare them for their first jump. One thing that is unique about the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is that they give people with physical and or mental disabilities the opportunity to serve, unlike the United States. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, highlighted the IDF's spirit of inclusion best. Netanyahu said, "A strong nation



Having dinner with our Israeli counterparts

is one that does not leave its most vulnerable members behind. Israel is the only nation in the world that has a strong army with the ability to include people with disabilities.” Israel sets the example that everyone belongs and has their own unique talents and they have the right to contribute to their country’s military and help keep its citizens safe. There are many jobs within the military that don’t require the use of brawn or brute, but only require a sharp mind. I come from a military family going back at least three generations and wanted to follow in my Father’s and Grandfather’s steps by joining the US Air Force. Unfortunately, when I acquired a physical disability, I had to accept my dream of being able to serve my country would never come to fruition. If I had lived in Israel I would have still been able to realize my dream. It is my hope that countries start to follow Israel’s lead of inclusion and empowerment by allowing people of all abilities to serve!

Another cherished part of this trip was the wheelchair basketball matches we played against the Israeli teams and the opportunity to view different adaptive sports facilities all over Israel. We played a total of five matches on our trip, and although we didn’t win any of the matches we



Entering The Olympic Experience

grew as a team, gained new basketball skills, and connected with our Israeli counterparts often sharing meals and great conversation after the game. Even though we come from different backgrounds and speak



different languages than the Israeli’s we played against, our connection as Jews and disabled athletes united us as one. It gave me a special insight into life as a disabled Israeli and a deeper connection to the state of Israel. We were also lucky enough to meet and converse with various Israeli Olympians and Paralympians in a number of different sports. Hearing about the trials and tribulations they had to go through to become world

class athletes renewed my perseverance in my own quest to become a Paralympic athlete.

The sightseeing we did was also a very important part of this experience. I appreciated seeing new sights that I had yet to experience during my previous trip, but seeing some of the same sights with the unique lens of experiencing it with this particular group made it all the more significant. Visiting these sights with good friends, some of who are coming to Israel for the first time gave me a new perspective and renewed appreciation for these historical sights than ever before. Some of the highlights were visiting the Western Wall, having lunch in a Druze village and learning about their religion,



Visiting the Western Wall



going to Yad Vashem, handcycling around HaYarkon Park, and visiting the ruins at Caesarea National Park. We also had the privilege of attending the Maccabi World Union Gala. My teammates and I had the opportunity to talk with some of the various delegations and as a result of these conversations, these delegations have plans to go back to their home country and integrate more athletes with disabilities into the 2021 Maccabiah Games. I hope that just our presence at this Gala and in Israel as a whole broadened at least one person’s view on disability. After all, it is not every day you see a group of 6 wheelchairs rolling

down the street.

Altogether this was a trip filled with extraordinary friends, amazing sights, and many life changing moments. I not only gained a greater understanding of Israel and my Jewish roots, but also a deeper understanding of myself. I believe going to Israel is an important part of gaining a deeper connection to Judaism and traveling off the beaten path while there is key to experiencing the heart and soul of the country. This was my first experience with Maccabi USA and the overall feeling I got from the staff and participants was that of family. Going in to this Maccabi Access mission I was contemplating competing in the Maccabiah 2021 games in wheelchair tennis, but now I am positive that 2021 is not something I am willing to miss. If it wasn't for the generous donations of Temple Sinai and the members, none of this would have been possible so I would like to thank each and every one of you for this unforgettable and momentous experience. Temple Sinai has built a strong, supportive, and inclusive environment and I am so grateful to be a part of this amazing temple family.



Meeting two-time Paralympic silver medalist Aniek van Koot
Ranked number 3 in the world in wheelchair tennis



Exploring the Old City



Speaking with Boaz Kramer two-time Paralympian in wheelchair tennis and doubles silver medalist in 2008.