Title of Project: How do tours and tourists affect the understanding of “The Conflict” and Tourism in the Holy Land?
Country of project implantation: Israel
Sponsoring College: International House NY
Designated Project Leader: Maryann Philbrook

This project is supposed to create a holistic guide to the situation in Israel and Palestine for prospective Christian tourists. Ideally, they will use the audio podcast episodes and the discussion questions to educate themselves so they can reassess the political implications of their faith and religious tourism in Israel and Palestine.

This idea came about after I attended a two day course at my seminary about the Christian response to the conflict. This course made me very interested in how we, as Christians, affect the conflict through our tourism. Tourism is a very profitable industry in Israel, especially Christian tourists. This makes it important to look at how our money is being spent and what are the ways that the financial impact of tourism is impacting the conflict. I wanted to learn more myself and also create a tool for other Christians to learn about the complicated nature of the occupation before arriving.

This project almost did not happen because of the Covid-19 pandemic. I did not think it would be possible to do any sort of project around this idea because I could not travel to Israel. However, in conjunction with the staff at the International House, we came up with an idea to salvage the project. Covid-19 was a large obstacle, but I was able to come up with creative ways to engage directly with people in Palestine and Israel as well as Americans who had experience in the land. I was able to create a new project with similar goals.

I believe that most people are trying to do what is “right.” However, if people do not have the information that they need, they may inadvertently cause harm. Some people think of visiting Israel as an apolitical choice, motivated by faith and devotion rather than actively participating in present events there. The conflict in that space is obscured by both the deliberate favoring of particular political narratives in the media and the significant distance and foreignness of the region to most of its visitors. The history of Israel and Palestine is long, complicated, and made to feel inaccessible to many. Difficult questions such as: what it means to visit Israel and Palestine in the midst of an ongoing conflict, how does one reconcile the call to see these spaces with the unintended (economic) support of the current situation, what do the teachings of the Bible and Jesus prescribe for their followers in this situation, etc. - these issues become secondary behind the myth of tourism or religion being apolitical.

In order to answer these questions, and others, I worked with people I have known personally as well as those tour guides and companies they recommended. I interviewed and worked mostly with a company called Green Olive Tours which is a collective of Israeli Jews, and Palestinian Muslims and Christians that attempts to address the conflict by having an organization that leads tours but also operates within an egalitarian framework. I chose that organization because it included people on all sides of the religious divide and because it was recommended to me by a personal friend. At first, I was concerned about communication, but all of the people I worked with spoke English very well, although it was a second language (or 3rd or 4th or 5th) for the Palestinians that I interviewed. I expected to have more trouble with connecting over the internet, or with language limitations. It was actually very easy to communicate across these linguistic and physical barriers.

Through Green Olive Tours I attended multiple “tours” from the comfort of my home in Chicago. I wish I could have been there in person, but this gave more flexibility and allowed me to interact with not only the tour guides but other tourists from all over the world. Although it was nice to be in my living room, I do not feel like I really understand what Palestine is like because I have not been there. A goal for this trip was for me to travel to Israel and Palestine and get a firsthand experience of the country. It was very difficult for me to accept that this would have to be a remote project. Once I came up with a plan for how to make it work remotely the pieces started falling into place, but it still feels like this project will not really be
complete until I set foot in the country and feel the ground under my feet and smell the scents that are unique to their land. It also shifted the emphasis from my own experience of the Holy Land to that of others, both American and local. I think that’s a very important shift that contributed to the final project being more holistic and providing a rich set of different perspectives.

Obviously, peace was a topic I talked about with all the people I interviewed. Terms like ‘peace’, ‘safety’, and ‘justice’ are often framed differently and sometimes even in opposition with each other. As my project explored, different traditions also have varying definitions for these difficult to define concepts. But ultimately, peace is not simply the lack of violence. I believe that there are two conditions for peace: first, a shared goal of equality and justice. Second, an investment in the things that enable people to work towards that goal i.e: access to information, educating people on their history, transparency and accountability in institutions. These two things combined would lead to a society where everyone is consistently working to make things better for both themselves and their peers – that is peace.

I hope that this podcast will contribute to building more peace through providing access to information. In the short-term, I hope that the podcast series’ listeners will leave with a deeper understanding of the nuances in the situation in Israel/Palestine and be more reflective of where they – and their faith – stands in relation to the conflict. In the long-term, I hope that the podcast will inspire the general population to educate themselves about the culture and history of a space before visiting it – especially when it’s involved in an active and long-standing conflict, such as Israel – thus creating a more conscientious form of tourism that truly benefits destinations rather than exploiting them.

Everyone involved emerged with a much deeper understanding of the conflict in Israel and Palestine and learned more about the complicated definition of tourism in relation to such a space. People interviewed – some actively involved in peace-building organizations in the region – got the chance to share their story and promote their ventures.

This project affected me very deeply. It gave me a much deeper understanding of the situation and I saw how people engaged in liberation and peace-building because of their faith. I also saw that people learned wherever they were starting from and were able to really connect with people and with God through these trips. It was powerful for me to meet people who had similar backgrounds to me and were able to find a deeper faith amidst the pain and suffering of an ongoing conflict.

When I think about future Projects for Peace grantees, my advice is to get over what you planned and do what comes your way. Be flexible with your ideas. Hopefully, none of you will be faced with a global pandemic at the onset of your project. But if we’ve learned anything in the past two years, it’s that life can change suddenly, and you have to be able to adapt. I was disappointed when I realized that I would have to use my funds on a Zoom subscription instead of plane tickets, but rethinking the project helped me engage with my chosen topic in a different way. Ultimately, the project was a very fulfilling learning experience and I produced something that I was proud of. That would never have happened if I’d been too rigid and unable to imagine anything other than my original vision. So be flexible and open-minded – sometimes change is good.

Personal Quote:

The Project for Peace grant, even though I had to implement it remotely, gave me an opportunity to learn about peace from a holistic perspective through conversations with people who have lived without peace. I hope that the podcasts I created will be useful for others to deepen their understanding of the conflict in Israel and Palestine and explore what a faithful response can be.

Maryann Philbrook (maryannphilbrook@gmail.com)
Section II: Photographs