



Israel in 3D: Talking Israel on the Front Lawn

An interview with Sam Magnes

Sam Magnes is the vice chair of the Jewish Leadership Council at the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville, Virginia. She is studying economics and beginning an accelerated Master's program in public policy. Sam is also researching religious violence and the American welfare system.

We're curious....what will you be up to in 2020?

I don't know yet because...I don't have 2020 vision! I want to take advantage of whatever opportunities I am given and see where that strategy takes me!

Now to the heart of the matter...When did you first "meet" Israel? What inspired you to learn more?

I first met Israel when I went on Birthright. I knew very little about Israel until I came to college and began taking a class on Israeli politics. My first winter break, I went on Birthright with my school's Hillel and saw all the things I had been studying come to life. It was an incredible experience and made me curious to learn more and further develop my knowledge.

How do you stay connected to Israel today?

In addition to reading Israeli news and keeping up with my Israeli friends, I also run an initiative called "Lawn Chats" to help spur conversation about Israel with anyone who is curious. These take place with a small group of people in UVA's central

and historical "lawn rooms." I expect to host these every other week, inviting students who do not know very much about Israel and want to learn more.

And so far so good! We have been happy to host people with a diversity of perspectives. At the first Chat, we had a student from UVA's Christian community speak about his experience visiting Tel Aviv and Nablus during an internship on coexistence. He was fabulous. He did a really great job playing devil's advocate on a lot of issues. Even though the event was meant for six to ten people, we had 18 attend. Many members of the Palestinian organization on campus came and asked some hard questions, but we were all able to keep the conversation polite and sincere. Our speaker defended Birthright, explained a lot about Israeli culture and explained many misconceptions about the conflict. Honestly, it went great and set the stage for more of this kind of discussion.

At another Chat, we hosted five attendees, as well as an incredible Palestinian American speaker with truly inspiring views. He spoke a lot about how Islam and Judaism are quite similar and how we really are cousins. He was straightforward about Israel's right to exist and spoke about positive experiences he has had at Israeli checkpoints. I think his perspective was really useful for a mostly Jewish audience. It was helpful to see that there are people on the other side who understand and accept Israel even if they don't agree with all that Israel does.

How do you share Israel with others? What motivates you to do this?

I am very open about my love for Israel, but also that I am critical of many issues. It is very easy for that tension to come up in conversation and I try to make people feel comfortable asking hard questions. I also talk about Israeli food, culture and apolitical things that I miss from my last visit. I am motivated by both my genuine love for the country and also a sadness that many people just don't know enough to form their own opinions. I have found that biased media can sometimes make people misunderstand a complex situation.

Additionally, at our latest Lawn Chat discussion, I was able to share my own Israel experience. This was my favorite discussion because I finally reached my target audience. I had six people attend who knew very little about the conflict and I was able to walk them through my personal story. It gave me the opportunity to share what it was like to live in a diverse city in Israel, travel into the West Bank and learn from Israelis and Palestinians themselves about what it is like to be immersed in

it all. One participant went back and told their RA all about the event and how much they learned and enjoyed it. I hope that others feel the same!

How has your relationship with Israel changed over time?

I have become more critical of Israel—and more strongly attached. I think the more I learn about Israel and accept that it is not a perfect place, the more I am able to say that I really understand it and grow to love it even more.

If you could tell the world one thing about Israel (or an aspect of Israel) what would it be?

I would tell the world that Israel is not a perfect place, but it is a great place. A place with kind people and a desire for freedom, self-improvement and, ultimately, peace. Israel has challenges that often reflect those in America and it is inspiring to see such a young country progress so much. During my time in Israel, I met a lot of hopeful people and many who strive to make Israel an even better place to live.



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– Sam Magnes, Univeristy of Virginia