

Letter Sent after the Ride

I have just completed the Israel Ride -- cycling from Jerusalem to Eilat. On my last day of cycling I took some time to ride by myself to think a bit about what this ride means to me.

I love being in Israel and I am thrilled that I am becoming a stronger cyclist. It is lots of fun to meet my fellow riders, most of whom are Americans. They are intelligent, kind, smart and thoughtful men and women. But if that were all the ride were about it would just be a vacation. And Israel Ride is so much more.

For me, participating on the Israel Ride is an opportunity to make a difference in Israel. The Ride is like a pilgrimage of sorts, a journey to holiness, as we pedal to raise funds for a small but significant school – the Arava Institute.

Located on Kibbutz Ketura in the Negev, the Arava Institute has approximately 40 students per year. Men and women, Jews and Arabs, from North America, Europe, the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan and Israel come together to study the environment. Each student at the Arava Institute undertakes an impressive research projects crucial to the region, particularly on water, pollution and waste management. Their commitment to protecting natural resources in the region and their enthusiasm for changing the world is infectious.

On the Shabbat afternoon of the ride, we had a chance to hear from the crew who had been serving us lunch, marking our route, schlepping our luggage, and insuring our safety on the roads. The crew are all alumni of the Arava Institute. They are young, idealistic, and courageous. They want to protect the natural environment and bring peace to all the inhabitants the land.

Let me tell you about three remarkable individuals I met: Abed from Jordan, Lisa from the United States and Ayelet from Tel Aviv.

Abed had never met a Jew until he came to study at the Arava Institute. As a child he learned that when the Jews settled the land of Palestine early last century they displaced his parents who are now living in Jordan. He was angry. His life as a refugee in Jordan was difficult. While his parents made Jordan their home, they always missed their life in what we call Israel today. When they fled Palestine in 1948 they left many personal belongings behind. Abed heard about the Arava Institute while studying at the University in Amman. Always interested in environmental issues, he thought this was a good opportunity -- to learn, to study and to grow. His parents were furious. For a time they stopped talking to him. Many of Abed's friends considered him a traitor. But Abed was courageous and came to the Arava Institute. Now he has Jewish friends and understands that Jews also have a legitimate claim on the land of Israel. Now he understands that the Jews who came to Palestine were fleeing a hostile world in Europe and they did not come to displace the people living in Palestine, they

came to establish a Jewish homeland. Once Abed wanted to see the state of Israel destroyed, now he argues passionately that we must find a peaceful solution -- for Palestine and Israel to peacefully exist side by side. He has brought his new Jewish friends home to Jordan and his parents and friends have begun to accept Abed's course in life.

Lisa is a product of Jewish day schools and camps. She graduated from Smith College in 2006 and was a Jewish studies major in college. Upon graduation she wanted to spend some time in Israel. Lisa understood and was passionate about Zionist claims to establish a Jewish state. But she had never known that the Palestinians also have a legitimate claim on the land. In a panel discussion Lisa explained "I had been taught the Jewish story of the last century. I never knew that there was another narrative. As a student at the Arava I have learned that the Jewish narrative is not the only one I must know and understand if I am to be an effective Jewish leader."

Finally Ayelet grew up in Tel Aviv. Having served in the military Ayelet began college and was interested in environmental issues. When she applied to the Arava Institute, this young woman was not interested in studying with Palestinians or Arabs. One of her favorite high school teachers had been killed in a suicide bombing a few years ago. She had never considered co-existence and had no idea that Palestinians have a story. But Ayelet knew that if she wanted to participate in cutting edge environmental studies she had to apply to the Arava Institute. Like Lisa and Abed, Ayelet is a changed woman. She does not excuse or accept acts of terror. But she has learned that the Palestinian story is a painful and that if peace is to become a reality she must find a way to make a place in her heart for the Arabs in her midst.

These men and women give me hope. I want to do everything I can to insure that the Institute thrives and that there are sufficient funds to recruit students each year. So far I have raised \$7500. My fundraising goal is \$15,000. That is the cost of tuition for one student per year many of whom are on scholarship.

If you have not yet sent in a check, please consider donating, any amount is welcome and will help me reach my goal. Checks should be made out to the Arava Institute and can be sent to me at home
79 Hillcrest Cove, Longmeadow MA 91106

Thanks so much for helping me make this happen.