

CET Jordan, Fall 2023 | Noa Bearman

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Who are the intended audience(s) of your Perspective Piece? "Jewish students in Jordan."

A Jewish Student Perspective on CET Jordan

I participated in CET Jordan during Fall 2023 from September to December and wanted to share my perspective specifically as an American Jew in the program. For some context on my perspectives, my name is Noa Bearman (she/her) and I was raised in an Ashkenazi Conservative Jewish community in North Carolina (in the Chapel Hill/Durham area). I identify as white, grew up going to Jewish day school, Hebrew school, and my conservative synagogue, had a bat mitzvah and observed most major Jewish holidays, went to a Jewish summer camp, and participated in other "traditional" Jewish American experiences.

I write all this to say that I am speaking from my singular experience, and those with different backgrounds, identities, practices, and experiences may have a different perspective. However, I wanted to share with other Jewish students to better understand what it could be like as a Jew in Jordan with the CET program.

I first want to say that I had an incredible experience at CET and learned so much about Arabic, Arab and Jordanian culture, my own identity and perspectives and more. I had an incredible but also very difficult experience that was shaped by Israel/Palestine and specifically the events on and following October 7th 2023. I am not writing this to be a political piece or perspective, but this is crucial context that can not be ignored when considering my experience as pertains to my Jewish identity.

I dealt with a lot of internal struggles about my sadness, anger, frustration, confusion, etc. relating to the violence towards Jews in Southern Israel (people that were friends of my community even if I didn't know them personally) and violence towards Palestinians systemically perpetrated by Israel in the West Bank and Gaza as well as the mass murder of Palestinians that has continued since October 7th (as I write this, Jan 2024).

Throughout the program, I was supported in different ways by different groups, including friends and family from home, my roommates and close friends in the program, the program directors, and my Jordanian friends. My family and friends at home knew me and allowed me to vent and helped me process; my roommates and close friends on CET listened whenever I needed and provided love, support, and perspective; the directors were there whenever I needed emotional and/or academic support (which I did on at least one occasion) in both Arabic and English and with openness and respect for my feelings and needs; and my Jordanian friends provided me with love, reassurance, their own feelings and perspectives, and a different kind of understanding (we all were feeling hurt and sadness that we could share in and sit with together).

I greatly value these relationships and experiences and felt the program did a good job in supporting in these regards. However, there were certain aspects that were difficult and limiting merely due to the context, including a limited group of people I could talk to openly about my feelings, and a limit to the discussion of Israel/Palestine in general within the program (so as to prevent conflict). I felt that the attempts to provide group processing space fell short of being supportive or helpful, specifically in recognizing the deep hurt and difficulty many students (not just myself) and, of course, the teachers were feeling as we all witnessed horrors through our phone screens. I do not know a "right" way to handle this and everyone was trying their best, but it is important to recognize that these shortcomings were felt.

On a somewhat different note, I want to address other aspects of my Jewish identity as it pertains to my experience. One of the common questions I have received after returning from Jordan was whether I experienced antisemitism, and without going into the complexities of defining antisemitism, the short answer is no. However, I am not visibly Jewish (I don't wear a Kippah or tzitzit or cover my hair, etc.), and often did not share this part of my identity until I better got to know someone. When I did share my religion with Jordanians, I was always welcomed with love, curiosity and/or indifference (like any other religious person). I did hear and experience comments of ignorance and stereotyping in general about Jews, and there are aspects of discomfort I felt around certain ways that Judaism or Jews came up or were represented during my experience. For example, I learned that in some iterations of history, the national dish of Jordan, "Mansaf" (a dish of meat cooked in a yogurt sauce), originates from the 9th century BCE Moab Kingdom (east of the Dead Sea) to identify Jewish traitors before a war with the kingdom of Israel (as the dish is not Kosher and thus can't be eaten by Jews) following common historic antisemitic trends of viewing Jews as traitors.

In respect to one of the most important aspects of being Jewish in Jordan, practicing Judaism, my experience was mixed. I was one of two Jewish students in the program, and we attempted to practice shabbat on occasion and major holidays when possible (but even then experienced difficulties as he follows Sephardic practices and I follow Ashkenazic practices of Judaism). While in the past we heard that students had traveled to Israel for holidays, the cost and logistics felt like too much of a hurdle, and we preferred to try to practice in Jordan. As such, with the help of CET, we attempted to reach out to the US embassy in search of Jewish community in Jordan but received little response at first. Because we got no response before the high holidays, we ended up celebrating Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in our apartment via Zoom services and YouTube services, which was definitely not ideal. However, by Sukkot, we were able to connect with a small number of practicing Jews in Amman and were able to celebrate Sukkot at a Jewish family's home (from the embassy), which was a welcome and lovely experience and a relationship that could be fostered by future Jewish students.

One of the purposes of this program and one of the reasons I found CET so impactful and valuable is to put students in new environments and push them outside of their comfort zones. As such, I greatly valued the experience of CET, and I encourage other Jewish students to participate in CET Jordan and push themselves in new ways to learn and grow.