

I write this post with a heavy heart and an unfortunate sense of déjà vu.

In 2014 I spent my summer in Israel traveling with Young Judaea on its Israel program, Machon. I loved Machon. I had looked forward to Machon my whole Young Judaea life. What could be better than a carefree trip through Israel with my closest friends?

But my summer was not easy. We arrived at the height of the conflict in Gaza, just before Operation Protective Edge began. Our trip quickly turned into schedule changes, security briefings, and practice sirens. Then we experienced a siren for ourselves. I still remember sitting in a shelter in disbelief as our Israeli madrich — our counselor — told us that unfortunately this is just normal for him. It becomes second nature after a while, he said.



When Machon ended, I felt as though even with all of the hardships I was lucky that I got to experience Israel not only in its glory but also in its troubles. I learned a lot more that summer than I think I would have had I not experienced the conflict in this way. I looked at my experience on Machon and carried it with me as I stepped back onto an El Al flight to embark on my Year Course journey.

Sadly, I am flooded with similar feelings as my time on Year Course also has become overshadowed with terror. Violence in Israel, specifically in Jerusalem, has increased dramatically over the last few weeks, leaving the country in disarray and its people living with terror. Last week, my roommate decided she could not get on a bus because there was too high of a risk of a pigua — a terror attack. We could not celebrate Simchat Torah in the Old City, because Year Course students were restricted from going for security purposes.

When I got the text that the Old City was too unsafe and we were not allowed to enter my heart dropped. Was I back on Machon? Would plans have to change constantly in order to keep us safe? Would I miss out on key moments because they were located in areas too unsafe for me to walk through?

When I told people I was leaving to spent a year in Israel, I was constantly asked whether I felt safe doing so, in light of my previous experience. I always said yes. Young Judaea proved to my family and to me that they can and will keep us safe. I felt prepared and comforted knowing I had been through it before.

But in reality, my experience on Machon could not prepare me for this. This violence is vigilante acts of terror. As I write this, I have just received a Facebook notification saying that because of the multiple attacks spanning across Israel, which happened only this morning, we cannot leave our home base. We cannot go out in groups of less than three. We can leave only for classes and necessary errands, and we must be in contact with our madrichim at all times.

When we discussed the situation last night, one of our Israeli scouts told us how much it upsets her that this is the Israel we have to experience. This isn't even the Israel that Israelis experience. It's an unfortunate reality — but it is not the norm. Yes, violence and terror are constantly associated with Israel, but the last time Israelis experienced terror that was manifested in this way was 2001, before anyone of my generation can remember.

Some of us feel that this experience can only enhance our time in Israel, and allow us to be better advocates when we return home. While I agree and try to have the same mindset I did during Machon, I am scared. I am angry. I am sad. Today I saw a post on Facebook that really stuck with me: "If killing people on the streets is wrong in NYC, wrong in London, wrong in Paris, then why is it acceptable here?" It pains me to say that I felt safer when there were rockets shot into Israel daily than I do now. There's no intelligence to collect on someone who wakes up and decides in that moment to murder, no Iron Dome to stop a knife, no shelter protocol for a gun on a bus. This is new territory for us all.

I want to end here on a more inspiring note. Although I am scared, there is a national sense of comfort that is unique to Israel. I don't know how to explain it but when I am here, even in the most troubling of times, I feel that there is someone looking out for me. There's a sense of protection even when we are vulnerable.

In a classic twist of fate, "Yihiye Tov" by David Broza has just come on my iTunes. I'd like to conclude with some of the lyrics, "We will learn to live together between the groves of olives trees. Children will live without fear, without borders, without bomb shelters. On graves grass will grow for peace and love. One hundred years of war, but we have not lost hope."

I have not lost hope. I will not lose hope. I wish for a better tomorrow.

*Tamar Arenson is from Closter and is spending her gap year in Young Judaea's Year Course. She graduated from the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School in Manhattan and will begin her freshman year at Tulane University next fall.*