

# A two-way mirror

The week before Passover, 10 students from Jerusalem's Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies traveled to Turkey to take part in a unique community service trip. Both sides reflect upon how the 5 days impacted and transformed everyone involved



PARDES STUDENTS give a lesson on Passover in Edirne. (Courtesy)



## The American viewpoint

• GEO POOR

**A**s we walk through the Turkish streets, passing coffee shops, pubs and souvenir peddlers, we see a large man loitering by the wall, trying to be inconspicuous. His eyes follow us as he raises his black-clad arm to his face and whispers into his sleeve.

Is there a member of the government nearby? Are we about to be arrested?

The man then smiles and gestures toward a discreet doorway. We pull the heavy iron door open, newly unlocked, and enter the building as if it were a speakeasy – as if we had to hide who we were and what we were doing.

The man outside, it turns out, is an undercover guard, whose job includes alerting his colleague inside that there are Jews arriving. Thank God, we never learn what other tasks his job description may include.

Once inside we wait, for the next large door will not open until all of our party is inside and the outside door is closed. It closes, and a red light turns green. We enter another chamber – another closing door, another light changing. It's hard to enter a Jewish institution in Istanbul.

But once we are inside, the synagogues are beautiful; the Jewish school is breathtaking. Spending hours at these buildings, it's easy to forget the intense security required to enter. It's easy to forget we are in a country that is becoming increasingly hostile to Israel, and to Jews. It's easy to forget that the Jewish community of Turkey has been shrinking dramatically.

For the Jewish life inside is vibrant: The school has 600 pupils and has just started having a daily minyan for the first time. Youth and adult groups gather in the school building at night to learn, schmooze and celebrate being Jewish. The weekly synagogue minyan has a large number of participants, and they stick around for a leisurely breakfast afterwards. Everywhere we walk, we are greeted with a smile and a hearty welcome – at least when we are inside the communal walls.

The Turkish Jewish community may be struggling, but it is alive and kicking.

I AM an American studying for the year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem; I am part of a program that is training passionate young Jews to be Jewish educators, to take the Torah we learn and inspire the next generation. Ten of us traveled from Pardes a few weeks ago to the city of Istanbul, to serve as educational ambassadors to the Jewish community there.

We prepared lessons and activities for the pupils, and *divrei Torah* and songs we could pull out of our back pockets any time there were five minutes to spare. At the school, we ran a trivia game about Passover for the fourth- and fifth-graders, and held a discussion on the Four Sons for the 10th-graders. Each session found the children huddled around one or two of us in discussion, exploring the facts and the meaning of the holiday; we concluded every one singing together about leaving Egypt.

We joined the broader community in many different settings throughout the week, and what struck me was the tapestry of the Jewish community of Turkey, and the individuals that create it. In America, you can walk into a synagogue and not be greeted, and not say a word to someone you don't already know. In Turkey, the community embraced us and was eager to learn with us. They



(Courtesy)

PARDES STUDENT Geo Poor teaches fourth grade Turkish-Jewish pupils.

showed us how lucky we in the US and Israel are to have Jewish communities close to one another, with Jewish knowledge, teaching methods and new ideas moving in and out with zeal; feeding off one other and growing our Jewish educational experience.

In Turkey, a community fairly isolated from the rest of the Jewish world, this is not the norm. As we taught at the school, the children and the teachers did not check out; they sat rapt, dissecting our methods, asking questions of the Pardes faculty that guided us through our trip. Upon exiting the country, we felt we had taken a large chunk of our enthusiasm and handed it over to the community, leaving them with new ideas and motivation to innovate and rethink Jewish education.

For us, Turkey is no longer just a country with a pendulum-like relationship to Israel. It houses a living, breathing Jewish community, one of the oldest constant ones in the world, that we have come to know and love. As much as we inspired them, they definitely left an imprint on us – in the shape of an eager, loving, challenged yet hopeful Jewish community.

In turn, working as a group to create, refine and execute lesson plans and other experiential educational moments, then working to refine them some more, served as a great inspiration to us. I don't think any of us left the trip without a renewed excitement for the beautiful and holy work one can do as a Jewish educator.

The opportunity to do this with our extremely talented fellow students and one of our brilliant Pardes teachers was not only an honor, but also incredibly valuable. We got to see what a group of diverse Jews can accomplish educationally when we approach our work as a team with deep respect and passion.

Jewish education is a profession in which you simultaneously get to inspire and be inspired. Our experience with the Jewish community of Turkey will stay with us educationally and inspirationally for a long time. I am sure we will stay with them, too. ■

*The writer is from Massachusetts and is currently a student in the Pardes Experiential Educators Program. He is a graduate of the Hornstein Program for Jewish Professional Leadership at Brandeis University.*





# The Turkish viewpoint

• GABI BEHIRI

**S**halom! My name is Gabi and I am a simple Jew living in Istanbul. I am 23 years old and currently studying chemical engineering at Istanbul Technical University; I consider myself an active member of my community, regularly attending Shabbat services at the Caddebostan Beth El Synagogue on the city's Asian side, learning at the Talmud Torah classes, and becoming the *mazkir* (secretary) for two years of the Hanoar Hatzioni youth movement.

Last year, as my duties in Hanoar Hatzioni came to an end, I continued my communal involvement through an organization called Shivim Panim. One of its objectives is to revitalize Jewish education in Turkey, by bringing in educators from around the world.

Like Jewish communities worldwide, Turkey's 17,000 Jews are battling two major problems: anti-Semitism and assimilation. With Turkish-Israeli relations at an all-time low, the government has not taken an official stand against the rise in anti-Semitism. But whether it's on the street or on social media, anti-Semitic actions, articles and tweets are rife. From the inside, the community is threatened by growing apathy and increasing intermarriage. The future does not look promising at all.

Against these two issues there is only one solution, education; education which instills Jewish pride, which teaches a responsibility to enlighten the world, which has the motto of love at the center – love of people and love of God. Despite being one of the world's oldest Jewish communities with a rich history of rabbinical leadership, today we are struggling to offer homegrown and innovative Jewish content. So, last month, we brought over a group of Pardes students for five days to work in the community and bring some of their energy and exciting learning to Turkey.

One of the main objectives of the program was to teach for a day at the Ulus Jewish School, the only Jewish school in Turkey. The Pardes group taught fourth-, fifth- and 10th-graders about Passover, sang songs and developed their Hebrew-language skills. Other programming included a session on *tzedaka*, charity, at the Aleph Community Center.

In a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the group attended the rededication of the Great Synagogue in Edirne, praying, dancing and singing alongside the over-1,000-strong congregation that had also come to witness this national historic celebration. Rabbi Dr. Levi Cooper, the Pardes faculty member accompanying the group, lectured on Maimonides to doctoral students in the philosophy department at the University of Galatasaray – one of the best in Turkey. The group also visited the Jewish old-age home, and through song and dance brought immeasurable joy to some of the oldest and loneliest members of the community.

The week ended on a high, with a *shabbaton* in the Ortakoy Etz Ahayim Synagogue. The school's 12th-graders were invited to a musical Friday night service and dinner led by Pardes, and the day was spent eating, singing and learning some more with the wider community.

But the trip was about so much more than just Jewish content. It was about the personal interactions and connections the group made with the youngest schoolchildren, the parents, the Jewish professionals and lay leaders, and even the nonagenarians. Each member of the group brought with them something new and different, yet all offered passionate perspectives of Judaism. They led by personal example, of what it means to be Jewish, inspiring and broadening horizons at every turn.

Personally, I knew little of the group before their visit. But I met young people like myself, who brought with them shared values of togetherness, respect for different ideas, intellectual discussion and questioning, and above all, the importance of education. I am really grateful for having had the opportunity.

Judaism is one word with many different meanings. For a small community with big challenges, we need to harness the power of solidarity and Jewish peoplehood, and underpin it with engagement and education. What Pardes brought to me and the community, and achieved in five days, is far more than I can convey.

During the trip, one of the things I learned was about the power of blessings. I would really like to thank Rabbi Cooper, Louise, Loren, Maya, Ariela, Tmima, Myra, Geo, Melanie and Bonnie for everything, and bless them with continued learning and teaching – bringing light to the world wherever they go.

*The writer lives in Istanbul and is part of the Shivim Panim initiative.*



TURKISH JEW Gabi Behiri blows the shofar in Edirne. (Courtesy)



THE PARDES group attends the rededication of the Great Synagogue of Edirne.