



Henry Morris Memorial Trust Israel Expedition - Handbook

קרן הנרי מוריס



Chutzpah and *Balagan*: Understanding Israeli (Start-Up) Culture

Three men are standing on a street corner... an American, a Chinese man, and an Israeli...

A reporter comes up to the group and says to them: "Excuse me, what's your opinion on the present shortage?"

The American says: "What's a shortage?"

The Chinese man says: "What's an opinion?"

The Israeli says "What's 'Excuse me'?"

- Mike Leigh, *Two Thousand Years*

Newcomers to Israel often find its people rude and blunt. Israelis will unabashedly ask people they barely know how old they are or how much their house or car cost; they will even inform people - sometimes complete strangers - that they are not dressing appropriately for the weather. People who are less than fond of this sort of frankness can become indifferent towards Israeli culture, while others may find it refreshing in its honesty.

What Matt and I were experiencing was our first glimpse of Israeli *chutzpah*. According to Jewish scholar Leo Rosten's description of Yiddish - the all-but-vanished German-Slavic language from which modern Hebrew borrowed the word - *chutzpah* is "gall, brazen nerve, effrontery, incredible 'guts', presumption plus arrogance such as no other word and no other language can do justice to." Outsiders such as ourselves were acutely aware of the pervasive presence of *chutzpah*; in the way university students speak with their professors and teachers, sergeants question their generals, and employees challenge their bosses. To Israelis, however, this is not *chutzpah*, but the normal mode of being. From a young age (it would seem), Israelis learn that assertiveness is the norm, while reticence or flattery risk you being left behind.

Israeli attitudes and informality also flow from cultural tolerance for what some Israelis call "constructive failures" or "intelligent failures" - colloquially known as '*balagans*'. Most local investors and entrepreneurs believe that without tolerating a large number of these *balagans*, it is impossible to achieve true innovation or success. Serving in the Israeli military, young Israelis develop a tendency to treat all performance - both successful and unsuccessful - in training, simulations and even battle as value-neutral. So long as the risk was taken intelligently, and not recklessly, there is something to be learned.

Launching a start-up or going into a high-tech industry has become the most respected and "normal" thing for an ambitious young Israeli to do. What in most countries is somewhat exceptional in Israel has become an almost standard career track. This is despite the fact that, even in an economy that relies on technological investment and commerce, the chances of success for start-ups are low. In an interview with Doron Tal, CEO and co-founder of Israeli-based Articoolo, Tal aptly summarised this unique cultural notion:

"It's okay to try and to fail. Success is best, but failure is not a stigma; it's an important experience for your résumé."

The secret, then, of Israel's economic and technological success can be attributed to a unique blend of three main factors. Firstly, the leadership, teamwork, and mission-oriented skills and experience young Israelis receive through military service. Secondly, a well-cultivated willingness to accept, and even embrace, failure provided that it can be used constructively. Thirdly, the culturally-inextricable audacity to speak out, to challenge, and therein to change.

This last theme can be traced to the very idea of Israel's founding. The modern nation's founders were building what might be called the first 'start-up state' in history. As former Israeli President Shimon Peres famously said:

"The most careful thing is to dare."

Travel Log: Sunday 16th - Thursday 20th July

Sunday 16th - Luton to Tel Aviv:

After a somewhat lengthy flight from Luton Airport to Ben Gurion International (not to mention a quick visit into our plane's cockpit upon landing), we travelled by train to Tel Aviv. Mere hours into our trip, Matt and I had quickly become more aware of the presence of firearms, namely those carried by IDF recruits; young Israelis the same age as the two of us. At the airport, we had been required to answer a selection of 'security questions' before entering - insights into the assertiveness collectively exhibited by Israelis. That evening, we set out into central Tel Aviv and soon become well-acquainted with the historic Florentin district and its world-renowned street food scene. We reflected on our anticipations for the week ahead: new people, new challenges, but most importantly what we stood to gain from our time in Israel.

Monday 17th - Tel Aviv, Herzliya and Petah Tikva:

Setting off promptly, we relied on Matt's international internet access to navigate our way around the busy metropolis; what would have perhaps been a major logistic issue was preemptively dealt with using Matt's phone. To save time (and indeed money), we purchased the Israeli equivalent of an 'Oyster card' - referred to as both a 'Rav Kav' card or 'Hofshi Yomi' (Hebrew meaning 'daily pass') - that would serve us well over the course of the week. Israel boasts the most accessible and inexpensive public transport service in the world, meaning that we could easily rely on bus services for long-distance travel. Arriving in Herzliya, we interviewed two representatives from Sightec, an Israeli start-up subsumed by Amazon. We also travelled east to Petah Tikva for a further interview that afternoon, again using buses to ensure that we arrived promptly. With several interconnecting bus routes, this was by far the most complex day in terms of travel; however, using our navigational resources (digital map of Tel Aviv and GPS), we were able to travel safely and efficiently around the city and its neighbouring districts.

Tuesday 18th - Tel Aviv to Jerusalem:

Before leaving for Jerusalem, we interviewed the CMO of Argus Cyber Security, who explained how the Israeli start-up-turned-international-operation works with car manufacturers to prevent 'digital hijacking' of vehicles. We travelled east to Jerusalem by coach, and arrived in the early evening. Being in the Old City, we faced initial difficulty in finding our accommodation amongst the small, descending streets of the historic souks. However, we soon found our host and proceeded to the house - with ample time for exploring the nearby area (the Old City is relatively small - only 0.35 square miles in total - and yet there is so much to see and do, both at night and during the day).

Wednesday 19th - Jerusalem:

Our day of touring the Old City began with a 5-minute walk to the Western/Wailing Wall, the most sacred holy site for the Jewish faith. Approaching the 2000-year-old structure offered us an opportunity for quiet reflection; despite the fact that neither of us are Jewish, we both came away feeling deeply moved by the reverence with which pilgrims treated the site. We then proceeded to the Christian Quarter, visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - the site upon which Christians believe Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected. We also visited the Church of the Redeemer, the tower of which gave us excellent panoramic views of the Old City's four quarters and the nearby Mount of Olives to the east. It was only later in the day, upon crossing the border into the Occupied Palestinian Territories, that we gained an awareness of a sense of tension between the two peoples. A serious incident on the Temple Mount the week before we had arrived had unearthed bitter feelings on both sides; little did we realise that, where we had re-entered the Old City via the eastern Lion Gate, a protest was going to take place mere hours later. Despite the fact that we both felt completely safe in our travels, we did decide to make an effort to stay informed on local news for any updates on the situation.

When we returned to our accommodation, we discovered that we had a small cockroach infestation! Israel was experiencing a record July heatwave at the time, meaning that cockroaches were particularly attracted to cool places like our rooms. Discovering three cockroaches in total - one of which was inside of my (Harry's) rucksack - we meticulously combed through our bags and luggage before dealing with them to check for any others. Needless to say that we were somewhat uncomfortable at the time but, looking back, it is actually quite a funny story to tell.

Thursday 20th - Jerusalem to Tel Aviv:

Before departing for Tel Aviv, we visited Yad Vashem; a poignant memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. The Hall of Names particularly resonated with us - as part of the Hall, there is a display of 600 photographs of victims, which are reflected in a body of water at the bottom of the memorial to commemorate those victims whose names are unknown. After an emotive morning, we left Jerusalem by coach and returned to Tel Aviv.

Travel Log: Friday 21st - Sunday 23rd July

Friday 21st - Tel Aviv and Jaffa:

Due to a slight mix-up (admittedly the only one of the trip), Matt had to pay for a taxi to conduct an interview on the other side of the city, as the bus service would have taken too long. Meanwhile, I explored our new surrounding area, as we had returned to Tel Aviv staying in *different* accommodation to our first stay. As I walked around, I was able to talk to some of the locals about the history of the nearby port of Jaffa, within walking-distance of Tel Aviv. Jaffa, I learnt, was one of the oldest ports in the world, and was inhabited as early as 7500 BCE (according to archaeological evidence). When Matt returned, we settled on visiting Jaffa for the remainder of the day. One stall in Jaffa's famous flea market, at the centre of the town, had a hummus-flavoured ice cream for sale!

Saturday 22nd - Tel Aviv:

As a 'free day' (without any interviews or interview prep), we decided to visit the beach and go surfing - something I had never done before, and Matt had only done for several hours in the past. Located on the southern strip of Tel Aviv's coastline, Ha'Maravi Beach enjoys strong, high waves while the rest of the surfing beaches are relatively low. Naturally, we decided to throw ourselves in at the proverbial (although almost literal) deep end and head to Ha'Maravi, despite our lack of surfing experience (both of us are, however, very strong swimmers). Two hours later, both of us had managed to stand up on our boards once - a valiant, if not entirely successful effort on our part. Defeated by the waves, and utterly exhausted, we returned to our accommodation to rest and spent the rest of the day taking a relaxing walk around the city. Tel Aviv is renowned as the best place for sushi restaurants outside of Tokyo, so I decided to take Matt for his first taste of sushi - fortunately he enjoyed it! The sociable layout of the sushi restaurant allowed us to talk to some of the other customers during our visit, including a French-Israeli couple who gave their perspective on the city, life in Israel (as secular Jews) and universities in Israel compared to the UK.

Sunday 23rd - Tel Aviv to Luton:

After a relaxing morning spent in the city, we departed for Ben Gurion Airport ahead of our flight home. All appeared to be going smoothly, until we reached outbound security checks. It seemed as though my suitcase had set off an alarm; 'probably just a routine check', I thought. I was wrong. One by one, the Israeli security detail appeared to examine my bag and make a phone call, all whilst looking at me. Naturally, I asked what was going on - something was very clearly wrong - but this yielded nothing and they would not tell me. Three 'shake-downs', two X-ray scans and one fully-emptied bag later, the team decided to inform me that my bag was suspected for containing explosive materials. It certainly did not contain anything of the sort, but I was perfectly happy to allow them to conduct any searches they wished to do, and we did get on the flight with plenty of time to spare. An interesting end to our time in Israel - nevertheless, it was reassuring to know that the airport's security protocol did indeed work!

Note: Once we arrived back in the UK, I did some research on why my bag may have set off the system despite being completely clean. The best explanation based on my findings would be that tiny particles of explosive (from demolition work, for instance) material may have found their way onto the wheels of my suitcase during our travels around Israel, although we can never be absolutely sure. It was certainly an interesting experience to say the least!



תודה על ההזדמנות, קרו

הנרי מוריס

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Harry Camp and Matt Timmons-Brown

