Some thoughts on a visit to Israel – Elly – 22 March 2013

I visited Israel in March of 2013. The reason for the visit was an academic program review of four linguistics departments/programs in Israel (Tel Aviv University, Bar Ilan University, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Ben Gurion University of the Negev). I was part of a committee to report on linguistics in these universities and on linguistics in general in Israel. I can’t comment on this process but the report will be up on http://che.org.il/en/. The below impressions is what I got from discussions with various people and from reading Haaretz and The Jerusalem Post almost daily.

This visit was my first to Israel and the entry into the country went smoothly. The immigration official of course asked what I came to do and I rattled off the four universities. She was then concerned that I knew how far Ben Gurion University was – It really wasn’t! Tel Aviv, where I stayed, is the New York of Israel although it does sleep! Tel (I later found out) is supposed to mean ‘hill’ but there isn’t any around; it is really flat.

I arrived around noon on a Saturday so then walked to Jaffa (where things are open on the Sabbath) and spent time on the beach but although the water was 20 C or so the wind made it too cold for Israelis and Arizonans like me to go in.

The food is absolutely fabulous. The first night I was there, some of us on the committee had a meal at Herbert Samuel and that was amazing; breakfast at the hotel is too but in a different way: meters of cakes, cheeses, yoghurts, fishes, and salads. I have only had the freshest of fish and salads here. We were getting closer to Pesach so bread disappeared as did beer and diet soft drinks (but markets still have this right till Pesach). The hotel cleaned its kitchens carefully and got out the Passover dishes well before Passover. Most
regular people buy new dishes and kitchenware or use plastic. (Quite coincidentally the Russian national organization of Tupperware was meeting here last week so kitchenware galore). The Sabbath is often seen as a bother too: can’t have espresso or press orange juice!

The Israeli interactional style is very familiar to me but very ‘un-American’: people interrupt each other and are very critical and combative. I like it. It seems pretty non-hierarchical but I am sure looks deceive. Dress style is very informal too. None of the rectors have worn ties and most men dress in a shirt or t-shirt. It used to be that at Bar Ilan (the religious university) women had to wear dresses but this was no longer evident.

We were supposed to stay half the time in Tel Aviv and the other half in Jerusalem, but Obama’s visit on the 20th of March changed all that - it closed roads etc- and so we were confined to Tel Aviv! Tel Aviv is a modern city with an eclectic building style and pretty hectic traffic. It mainly combines architecture from the 19th century to now. High rises can’t go up in the centre but lots of these are going up around the centre.

There is good public transport, except on Saturdays when it stops, and bike rentals.
Ironically, on the same day the new pope was (s)elected, the country formed a new coalition government with some new(er) parties, the Yesh Atid (‘there is future’, a centrist party formed by Yair Lapid) and Habayit Hayehudi (‘the Jewish home’, a nationalist, non orthodox party). Obama had threatened not to visit if they didn’t get this done! Some major issues were/are if everyone should serve in the army, who should be paying for the large Hasidic families who don’t work, if marriage/divorce should be controlled by the orthodox Haredim, and – more mundanely - who the education minister should be. Our committee had been appointed by the Minister of Education Gideon Sa’ar but he became Interior minister instead.

Obama came on the 20th and held a major speech the day later that was called ‘honey and vinegar’ in which he praised Israel first and then told them to respect the rights of Palestinians (and the reverse should be said too about Hamas…).

Separation of church and state, i.e. the lack thereof, is a big issue for many Israelis. Many are fed up with the grip religious parties have on life on Israel. This is the reason the current government has no orthodox party included for the first time (in a long time or even ever). For instance, when Israelis get married, they have to choose between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian marriages – atheists are out of luck! Divorces are handled that way too. The hotel we were in has to be kosher (as do all hotels) which means no pressing of citrus on Saturday and no espresso machines etc. There is no public transport either on Saturday. Many Israelis feel these measures are forced onto them by people who may not even recognize the state of Israel and don’t do much for it. No bread in the hotel a week before Passover seemed to be a huge issue for many.

Some protests occurred at universities in March because of possible cut backs but it was all pretty laid-back: see the picture below. Both old and new government were/are going to save more on education I think. Security was not especially noticeable; but each building has ominous shelters, with the below on the 4th floor of the Webb building at Tel Aviv University.
What struck me was that Israeli university students are more mature. This is because they typically serve in the army for two years and sometimes learn about linguistics while training to be translators. Read a very impressive account of this by Shani Bianjiu *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid* (2012) about the experience of three women soldiers.

Other interesting stories the papers were full of last week are locust stories: “Swarms of locusts have continued to cross into Israel from Egypt and the Agriculture Ministry is preparing to carry out additional spraying of the insects, which pose a threat to agriculture. Sunday afternoon the ministry reported another large swarm moving toward Ashalim in the northwestern Negev.” This plague sounds biblical to me and of course these locusts have no immigration papers!

Walking through various neighborhoods in Tel Aviv is a delight but I hope they keep some of the really old building in a state of falling apart. The graffiti is very interesting as well.

What I’d love to visit another time is Jerusalem, Qumran, Masada, Capernaum, Sea of Galilee, Golan, and Eilat! And a graffiti tour. This is a nice site: [http://street-art-tel-aviv.blogspot.co.il](http://street-art-tel-aviv.blogspot.co.il) and I add a few further pictures.
Neve Tzedek

More street art

Jaffa Port, early in the morning

My hotel