

Ofer Ashkenazi

"I Want you to See Israel Through My Eyes"



By [Kavita Chhibber](#)

You tell him he is a spitting image of the late actor Yul Brynner and he laughs and says he has been told that many times before. He is extremely well read, full of stories and anecdotes not only about the history of Israel, but also about the other countries he has visited. No he wasn't a Professor - Ofer Ashkenazi was our tourist guide when we went to Israel, last month courtesy Project Interchange.

Ofer, whose ancestors are from Iran and Turkey, says his earliest memories of the strife in Israel are from the late sixties when as a kindergartener, he was headed for school with a family friend, a teacher. "The sirens shattered the peace and quiet and we had to stay in the shelter for two hours. My grand mother came to get me and as we got to a by lane where she went to check on some friends a rocket fell on the street we had been on. I remember staying at home for seven days till the war ended."

Ofer's mother recalled the days when they lived on powdered meals bought by coupons as Israel struggled to absorb the 600,000 Jewish refugees that had moved to Israel after the state was created. "But that is the nature of the Israeli Jews, each one gave up on meats and eggs so we could feed others..we got a limited supply of water, in which we cooked, bathed, washed laundry and then poured whatever was left into our little vegetable garden in Jerusalem to extract some benefit from the last few drops."

When Ofer's father came back home from the war, he took his young son to the wailing wall. "As a little child I had heard so much about it and had a child's excitement to see it expecting a wondrous site but when we went there all I saw was a wall as my father raised me up on his shoulders. Then I saw my father cry-the only time I have ever seen him do that, and I knew this was a special moment."

While today every Jew wants his child to be highly educated Ofer says that the time he was growing up in the 70s and 80s the most lucrative career was that of a bus driver. All government jobs were very attractive due to the stability and the perks as well as pension plans. Ofer wanted to be a fighter pilot but didn't qualify. He did a high tech job in a laboratory which was a typical 9 to 5 job as he tried to figure out what he wanted to do. "I was pretty clueless but I knew one thing-I wasn't going to be a tourist guide! It was mandatory for all school kids to go on tours. When you were younger you got to go for half a day, as you got older it became 1 day then 2 and I hated it. I would often beg my mother to let me stay at home."



After finishing his stint in the military Ofer decided to travel and went to America, Canada and Europe. "In 1983 Israel was struggling with the large number of immigrants, and if you asked for a phone line it took 3-4 years before you were allotted one and there I was in New York, fascinated by the high rise buildings and seeing a public phone at every nook and corner of the city. Now of course we are more advanced than even the Americans. You request a phone line and you get it within a few minutes. But at that time I thought Israelis take care of their state, Americans take care of their citizens."

After returning home Ofer went to school added a double major in geography and the history of Israel. Immediately afterwards he left for a tour of Asia with a friend. "For a year and a half we bag packed our way through Nepal, India and Myanmar among other places. Nepal was beautiful and we trekked for three weeks in the mountains but India in the late 1980s was a culture shock. We crossed the border and then rode in the most overcrowded bus I had seen in my life. We took a train and landed in Calcutta. I had never seen so many people, such poverty and couldn't adjust to the food and spices. I lost 20 pounds, but the people were fascinating. I told my friend no one will believe what we saw in India. You'd be sitting in Connaught Place in Delhi and suddenly someone will start cleaning your ears as someone else sat picking cow dung in front of you in a basket."

"We would have people constantly walking up to us and asking where are you from? At times exasperated we'd say we are from the holy land. 'Where is Holy land?' They'd ask. 'It's near Disney land,' we'd retort. 'Okay, can we walk with you?' They would respond. Once a dean of a Bombay university accosted us on the road and invited us to a party just because they wanted more foreigners there. In Israel the dean of a university went even talk to me, and here was this man inviting us to a party because they lacked foreigners! We went and had a good time but of course it was all very strange."

Ofer says he fell in love eventually with India and apart from Myanmar and Indonesia it is one of his favorite places to visit. "Of course I have been to India many times since then and its amazing to see the change and the modernization, but I feel in the interiors of India the Indian character where family and love is more important than money , still flourishes."

After the Asia trip Ofer also had the opportunity to run a Jewish youth camp in South Africa. "I was considered white and I could see my colored neighbor eyeing me with suspicion." When Ofer chose two white and one colored aide to help him run the summer camp in Cape town he was told he couldn't take the colored one, from the camp headquarters in Johannesburg. "I was surprised how just by sending them the names they could figure out there was a colored guy there. I was told all colored people had an identification number. We used the help of a top lawyer, the father of one of the youths when we were told the main reason for the hesitation to accept the colored man was the fact that the beaches used for the youth camp were for whites only and the colored man would be arrested. Two weeks later as the lawyer worked through the paperwork, and pulled strings, De Clerk made all beaches open to people of all colors. It was a gratifying moment." Ofer was in cape ton the day Mandela was released and heard his historic speech. He returned to Israel after spending a few weeks traveling all over Africa.

Since then Ofer has been a tourist guide working predominantly with Americans and Canadians. We were his first Indian delegation. He says 15 years ago people were less informed about Israel, he would get comments like oh we thought you traveled on camels since this is supposedly a desert. "It was always a shock for the tourists to come here and see how modern Israel is."

Ofer says the history of Israel makes its people be the best they can be. "I asked my mother once, 'Do you think I should join the army?' She said 'I'm a mother and I know it will be dangerous but I will never stop you because I don't ever want another holocaust.'" For many years in spite of the Olive branch extended by Germany Ofer refused to visit the country or buy anything made in Germany. A few years ago he finally went to Berlin. "The Germans have an interesting way of explaining the Holocaust. In the museum they talk about the German Jews but side track things about the Holocaust. To us they say - Those were the

Nazis we are Germans - it's different. Today Israel has ties with Germany after many years of shunning them. We haven't forgiven or forgotten, we just want to move ahead."

In his tours at times he meets Holocaust survivors, but the most interesting thing happened when during a visit to the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem a Canadian lady refused to come in and kept crying. "I thought she was a holocaust survivor and many of them don't like going in because of the horrible memories it brings back. She gave me a letter to read after she was gone. I found out after reading it that her father was a Nazi soldier and she was heart broken at what her father had been a part of."

Today, Israel is a strong country because of a history of hatred and violence that binds the Jews to each other. "We have worked very hard to become powerful so that we are not exposed to the same kind of discrimination again. Even when I was young the education system made me feel that we were strong and will take care of our state and the Jews all over the world."

Ofer says many still don't realize how safe Israel is nowadays, in spite of so much information on the internet, although he feels the media distorts a lot about the country and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Still he wants to be a part of every as many tours, to educate the people, to capture Israel's essence and gift it to them to take home.

"This is a safe country. It is also a holy land for so many people- from the Jews, to the Christians to the Muslims and the Bahais. It is also a very scenic country with mountains, the sea and so much culture. I enjoy seeing people from so many countries, even countries like Indonesia and Malaysia with whom we have no relations, come here. I would love to introduce you to my Israel and tell you all I can to make you understand that though we have our problems, things are not as they seem. When you come here and see for yourself, you will carry beautiful memories of an extraordinary land and a warm and welcoming community to take back home with you."