



INSPIRING PEOPLE

What It's Like To Be An Editor At The Jerusalem Post

APRIL 14 by NATALIE ZISA

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Laura Kelly, 28, has been an editor at *The Jerusalem Post* for almost two years. After traveling to Israel on birthright and falling in love with the country, she took an internship working on the newspaper's website. She quickly moved up to copy editing the print editions and after only six months had the opportunity to become the editor of one of their three-weekend supplements, *The Magazine*. Laura talked to the Lala about being a woman in a religious society, covering current events and entertainment during a time of tension, and her best advice for young writers.

the Lala: How would you describe your readers and how does their demographic dictate the types of stories you publish?

Laura: The demographic is between the ages of 30 and 90 years old, leaning more towards the older age range. They're English speakers, mostly religious, right-wing and conservative. That's not necessarily who I am. I do try to bring in a liberal, little bit left-winged point of view. I've published stories about gay rights and I've gotten hate mail for it. While I cover issues that I'm passionate about, I really try to keep an ear to the ground about what they're interested in. For example, Jewish communities around the world, debate among different streams of Judaism, different approaches to study of religion, how religion and politics intersect. I've actually covered religion and politics more than I thought I would. But the feedback is always positive and I want to give the readers things that they care about while educating myself in the process.

With that being said, it is a team effort. A lot of the stories are at the initiative of my freelancers. One woman wanted to write a story about how she was contemplating freezing her eggs and I told her to go for it. In Israel, it has its own particularities and a slight stigma. It's almost considered taboo in a religious society, but it was interesting to get that out there and have people talking about it. I always give my freelancers a lot of freedom because I like to see what they come back with and I don't like to change people's voices.

the Lala: How do you find the balance of covering current events, while also giving your readers entertainment?

Laura: Shortly after I became editor, tragedy struck Jerusalem. Three boys were kidnapped and rockets were being fired into Israel. I went to work every day not knowing what was going to happen and not sure how to work in feature stories because news could break any minute. There was rioting. The country was mourning. People weren't going out very much because you had to be close to a bomb shelter. Everybody has



going out very much because you had to be close to a bomb shelter. Everybody has somebody that they know in the army so people were going crazy donating things to soldiers and visiting them in the hospital. I was really struck by how people were reacting so I decided to write a story on that. During the height of the conflict, I also went abroad to a Muslim/Jewish conference. I was really nervous about how we would be perceived, but when we got there we realized that our concerns were not the main focus and we had really productive conversations. When I came back I ended up doing a story called Hagar & Hagar, about an Israeli Jew and Egyptian Muslim who have the same name.



After the war ended, all I wanted was happy news, something that could help us relax. We started having more festivals, so I began to focus on inspirational stories. I liked it and thought it was really fun, but I got one angry letter saying it was debauchery. You have a discussion with yourself about how much can we actually tackle week to week without beating down our readers? Especially on Fridays and Saturdays, since those are holy days of rest. It's one of their few forms of entertainment, do I really want to send them home with bad news? I wanted to make them excited, happy and feel something other than dread at the situation.

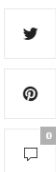
the Lala: What's it like being a female in the industry, in a religious society?

Laura: Being a woman in the Middle East is a little difficult. In a religious city, I definitely have to watch what I wear. I choose when I go into Arab villages because if I'm not covered up, I will get stared at and cat called. Being white as well, it's not so much that it makes you a target, but it definitely makes you stand out. In general, I've never been put in a dangerous situation. You're just always thinking ahead, about what you're wearing, what area you're going into. One time there was a movement of women reading from the Torah at the Western Wall (because the ultra-orthodox community says that's not allowed) and I went over in gym clothes and a backpack. There was a group of young men, probably 12-19-year-olds that were protesting the movement, and they yelled at me saying I wasn't allowed to be there and one young boy even pulled on my backpack. It got to a point where the police told me to leave because I was causing a disturbance. So that stuff happens, but because I put myself in those situations.



When I traveled to Kurdistan, I didn't see many women out on the street. There are a lot of cafes where men go to smoke hookah and drink tea and I chose not to go with my male colleague because I was getting a little exhausted of feeling the stares and always having to be aware of myself. Not only would I feel uncomfortable, but so would they. It's not my place or my society to tell them they're wrong. But when we went to the front line with the Kurdish army, I didn't shake anyone's hands because I know that religious Jewish men don't shake the hands of women and I think it's true for Muslim men as well. And you have to respect them, you're not in America. But they were all really respectful and curious as to who I was and all the soldiers wanted to pose with me for pictures.

As for the magazine, as a woman it's great to cover women's issues. We bring up issues that men wouldn't even think to bring up. I don't need to exclusively cover women's issues, but I always think "I could be you, you could be me."



The Magazine's cover for International Women's Day.



the Lala: What would people be surprised to hear about Israeli women?

Laura: They're not what you would expect. A lot of my friends are religious. If I was in New York, these people most likely wouldn't be my friends because I would be put off by their religiosity. But in Israel, it's just so natural. I'm far more aware of sensitivities for them and I feel very grateful that I know about that (what they can eat, when holidays are, etc...).

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These conversations wouldn't be had in America. Even the dating scene is different. People think there is a cognitive dissonance between being rational and religious and what I've seen is that there's not. I think that's what people would find so surprising.

the Lala: What advice do you have for young writers?

Laura: Keep writing. Writing is definitely a muscle. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. Read a lot. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there. I feel very lucky that I've felt more camaraderie than competition in the industry and I'm really grateful for that. If anybody reads this who's also in the news or thinking about going into the news, while you should always strive to be better, (it is good to have that competitive edge), just be nice to people. Some of the best work I've done is when I've worked together with people and not against them. I don't know if I've just been very fortunate, but I hope people appreciate that as much as I do.



Images courtesy of Laura Kelly, photo by Sam Sokol

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NATALIE ZISA
NATALIE ZISA, FORDHAM UNIVERSITY MAJOR: COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA STUDIES/JOURNALISM HER HEART BELONGS TO: DANCE, HER FAMILY, AND THE BEACH HER GUILTY PLEASURES: BRUNCH, SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON INSTAGRAM, AND CARROT CAKE DONUTS FROM DOUGHNUT PLANT TAKE HER AWAY TO: LITERALLY ANYWHERE IN ITALY - OR AN ISLAND



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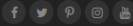


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