In June 2019, I traveled to Israel through a non-profit called Passages with a group of CSU students and students from various Ivy League schools. Passages sends Christian college-aged students to Israel to connect with the biblical roots of their faith and learn about modern day Israel. I learned and experienced more than can be explained in a lifetime let alone a short paper, so I have decided to share my favorite story from the week.

We visited a Kibbutz—a Jewish village—on the Gaza Border where the southernmost part of the Kibbutz is only seventy meters from the wall which separates Israel from the Gaza Strip. Security all along the border is intense and most of it is fenced. Certain parts—like this one—are separated by a twenty-meter-tall wall designed to protect Israeli citizens from direct missiles.

A man named Barak walked us around the village so we could see what life is like there living so close to the wall. All buildings have bomb shelters in them, bus stops are bomb shelters, the kindergarten building is one big bomb shelter, and the residents must use these shelters every few months. When the sirens, which indicate a missile is in route, go off, the residents have about eight seconds to get into the closest shelter.

The villagers used to interact with Gaza residents frequently. Palestinians would come into Israel to work and Israelis would go into Gaza to visit the shops and beaches. After the first Antifada in 1987, this cross-cultural interaction stopped. The wall went up after Israeli citizens were forced to move out of Gaza in 2005 when the terrorist organization Hamas rose to power. Now, Israel is beginning to build underground walls which will be between thirty and forty meters deep to stop terrorists from tunneling under the border.

We asked Barak why he chose to live there and put his family in danger daily. He said...
that the Kibbutz has been his family home for generations. Their whole village moved from the Sinai Peninsula after the 6 Day War in the early 1970s, and this time the village wants to stay put. Barak believes that if they all left, then the Palestinians would continue to creep on Israeli territory and therefore, he and the village serve on the front line protecting the rest of Israel. Finally, perhaps his most important reason, is that his family feels at home there. His oldest son is twelve and Barak told us that he recently asked his son if he wanted to move; his son said no. They have family, friends, neighbors, and community there at the border even among all the destruction.

Seeing this lifestyle and love for country gave me a new appreciation for the safety and security I have in my home. Here in Fort Collins, Colorado as a United States citizen, I take for granted the privilege to not worry about my life and property. Israel taught me a lot; one of the most valuable lessons was that I cannot assume another’s perspective or solve their problems. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is thousands of years long and both countries have valid grievances with the other side. I have never been asked to put my family in danger to protect the border of our country, and if it came down to that, I do not know if I would embrace that sacrifice. Barak has. Other cultures and peoples face problems entirely different from mine, but that does not diminish the significance of my or their issues. I cannot walk for Barak and he cannot walk for me, but we can walk together and learn from one another. Witnessing a culture on the other side of the world taught me this lesson.