Look Before You Speak
By Kate L. Rakoczy

In my two-and-a-half years at Harvard, I've read many an op-ed here on the pages of The Crimson about the conflict in the Middle East. We, as a community, possess some extremely strong views about the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. But I worry that we too often throw words around without realizing the weight they carry.

I recently returned from a seminar in Israel that was designed to give college journalists a better understanding of the region, the culture and, of course, the ongoing conflict. I was struck by how much those in the region know about America and by how closely they follow the American media. But often students in this country who express their views in the college press are often unaware of their far-reaching impact on policy both at home and abroad. Unfortunately, this is a responsibility that few take seriously enough.

On my trip, which was sponsored by a branch of the American Jewish Committee, I spent about eight days in Israel with ten other college journalists, visiting Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. We met with both Israeli and Palestinian professors, public servants, journalists and average citizens. It was a terrific opportunity to see a beautiful part of the world that boasts an incredible history and meaning for so many people. But more importantly, it was a window into life in a part of the world about which most of us know very little.

Standing at religious and historic sites and feeling connected to something larger than myself made it easier for me to understand how such a small piece of land could be the source of such bitter dispute. Visiting the Holocaust museum shed new light on the desire for a Jewish homeland. Meeting with a Palestinian journalist, who had to travel illegally to Jerusalem because he is not an Israeli citizen, called attention to the civil rights violations that have occurred in the wake of the Intifada. Hearing the immense sorrow of a woman who lost her daughter in the Dolphinaria disco bombing brought home the fear and pain of living every day under the shadow terror.

One of our speakers during the seminar, journalist and author Yossi Klein Halevi, shared with us a few words of advice for young, aspiring journalists. "Don't buy into conventional wisdom," Halevi said. "Be above the left and the right, and try to understand what's going on outside the ideological boxes."

In a situation as complex as the current conflict in Israel, that's not very easy advice to follow. And when one forms inflexible opinions from secondhand news one must
recognize the danger of not getting the true story. But by visiting places and speaking with the people who live amidst a particular conflict on a day-to-day basis, one can gain an understanding of a situation that is nuanced enough to step outside those ideological boxes. Suddenly, a bombing at a Tel Aviv bus station is not just a sad event that happened halfway around the world, it is a tragedy that occurred on my last night in Israel-as horrific and real as the news that the World Trade Center had been attacked. Although I didn't come away with a more informed opinion of who's right and who's wrong, I did gain a better perspective on this tragic dispute and left with a desire to learn more.

Ultimately, for me, this is the most important thing I gained from my trip to Israel: the ability to better relate to the people of this land and their experiences. Being able to see a situation through the eyes of the parties involved-not necessarily to agree with them, but to be able to perceive through the same lens-is the key to interpreting any situation accurately and fairly.

I am not, in any way, suggesting that we should not speak our minds, nor should we hold ourselves back from voicing opinions that we feel will help to right the injustices we perceive in this world. I would just urge us all to listen before we speak. As contributors to the opinion pages we should strive to be more empathetic. If we-hundreds of thousands of miles away from the Temple Mount-can't bring ourselves to try to see the other side before we spout our opinions, how can we ever hope for peace in the Middle East?

<i>Kate L. Rakoczy '04 is a social studies concentrator in Lowell House. She is Associate Managing Editor.</i>