

## Thoughts and Impressions of Israel Trip by Mitch Cypes

A BIG thank you to Rabbi Amy, who spent more than two years putting last November's trip together. We saw the city life of Tel-Aviv, historic sites in Caesarea, the Galilee and the Golan, both the old and new city of Jerusalem, a new Palestinian city and Petra. We met Israeli government officials, Israeli academia, kibbutz residents, a Kabala artist, a Palestinian mogul, Palestinian working professionals, Jewish settlers, and refugees. We had the opportunity to discuss with experts issues facing Israel and to eat food which seems to be in my genes to enjoy. This was the once in a lifetime trip. For me as a first-time visitor, I wanted to know 'what is Israel?'

Geographically, Israel is a small country. The first place we traveled to after assembling in the hotel in Tel Aviv was Neot Kedumim. It is a park where they are trying to restore native vegetation after the Ottomans devastated the land trying to plant crops that would not be viable for the area. It is in a hilly area, as is much of Israel. We were able to see the Tel Aviv area skyline about 15 to 20 miles away and an Arab village over the line in the 'territories'. We could hear the call to prayer. There was a small Israeli settlement close enough to hear children playing in the school. In the valley below was an army base with soldiers practicing on a shooting range. Above were planes flying to Ben Gurion Airport. So much to sense standing in one spot.

It took about an hour leaving Tel Aviv to get to Caesarea, from there less than an hour's drive to a Druze village, another hour to get to Kibbutz Lavi in the Kinneret/Galilee area. The next day we travelled about another hour to the edge of the Golan, where we could look into Syria. Leaving the Kinneret area on our way to Jerusalem we traveled south along the rift valley where we could see the Jordan River, with Jordan only a few hundred feet away on the other side. We travelled the only domestic flight route in Israel, Ben Gurion Airport to Ramon Airport north of Eilat. We saw much of the country in a little more than a week. Rabbi Bill Berk, who hosted us for a Shabbat dinner, told us after the Six-Day War until the beginning of the Intifada he was able to walk from his neighborhood in Jerusalem the five miles to Bethlehem.

Most of Israel is modern, the population only a couple of hundred years ago was less than 5% of what it is now. We were able to see how there has been a continuous Jewish presence in Israel. We visited Caesarea, a Roman style seaport built by Jews, and Katzrin, a Jewish archaeological site in the Golan. We were told by our guide that Katzrin was one of 24 known historic Jewish communities in the Kinneret and Golan area. We got to walk the streets of historic Safed, home to Kabbalah. We met a follower and artist, who explained what Kabbalah is and how he reflects it in his art. We also learned from a few olive producers that the manufacturing of olive oil started in what is now northern Israel some 8,000 years ago.

Dr. Elan Ezechiel informed us that historically about half the population in Jerusalem (only the old city before the 1880s) was Jewish. The Ottomans tried to hide this information. He also talked about how the Ottomans decimated the Jewish population of Israel during World War I. Jerusalem at that time was a poor place to live, without running water or sewage and with only dirt roads. Jews could not own land and had to rent from Muslim landlords. When these landlords were bought out by Christians in the 1880s, many Jews moved to nearby areas that

would become the modern portion of Jerusalem. After independence, the Jordanians forced the remaining Jews in the Old City to move out.

Rabbi Bill Berk told us a story of a pogrom in Europe where mothers and daughters were being raped and murdered. He said that many pogroms occurred during the Jewish holidays to make Jews fear the holidays. We saw the Kinneret cemetery, which had the graves of people who decided they were not going to be victims anymore. It was these Jews in the late 1800s that brought agriculture back to the Kinneret area.

We went to Yad Vashem. In addition to being reminded of the Holocaust, I discovered that Pruzhany, the shtetl that my maternal grandfather came from, was used as a feeder ghetto to Auschwitz. My grandfather fortunately left Pruzhany some 20 years before WW II and some five years before Jewish immigration to the US was stopped in 1924. I realize my ancestors, who decided to come to the US due to pogroms, threats of forced enlistments and land/property seizures, had the same experience that many who came to Israel experienced.

We saw a presentation at the Palmach Museum in Tel Aviv about how a militia came into being and how the Palmach organized a Jewish militia group for the British to train to defend Egypt during WW II. After the British victory in El Alamein, the group was told to disband. They used what they learned to train others, which would become the main part of the Israeli military during the War of Independence. They also described how Jewish settlements were quickly organized to show an expanded Jewish presence to the British. About 10% of the Jewish population died in the War of Independence.

At the Independence Museum in Tel Aviv, we were told how Tel Aviv was nothing but sand that the Ottomans were all too happy to sell to Jewish settlers, thinking the land was worthless. Now it is the most Jewish city in the world, the economic and cultural heart of Israel with many restaurants and markets. We also heard the story of the vote for independence. An offer by the King of Jordan for the land to be part of Jordan was strongly considered since it was estimated that there would be less than a 50% chance of survival should Israel declare its independence. The vote was close. The independence declaration was announced by private letter.

Dr. Elan Ezrachi conducted a walking tour in 'west' Jerusalem where the early government building and homes of the early leadership were located. We saw how close their homes and the government buildings were to the Jordanian border at that time. To protect the land from Jordanian snipers, well-placed barricades were set-up. Ezrachi showed us pictures of himself as a child in the area with the founding government officials. It was very much life on the edge.

We met with Tal Becker, a veteran from Israel's version of the State Department. He told us that he is the last person working for the department who was a participant in the Oslo Accords. He spoke about how in his time eight task groups from the US were sent to solve the conflict problem in the area. He spoke of the US ethos that any problem can be solved if you work hard enough, which means if you don't solve the problem, you didn't work hard enough.

Tal Becker talked about how calls for 'justice' were an obstruction to peace since it demonizes the person you are against. He spoke of how the conflict is part of the Palestinian identity. He

quoted Arafat that 'Israel is trying to improve the lives of Palestinians and I won't let you do that.' He explained that one obstacle to peace is that Jews have to realize that they are living in the best of times to be a Jew. He and others we met believe that if the world would stay out of the area, the Israelis and the Palestinians would solve their problems and live in peace.

We got to see how Kibbutz Lavi functions. They try to promote the people who live there to work and manage the Kibbutz's businesses, which for Lavi include a hotel, a farm and a furniture manufacturer. It was fun helping Rabbi Amy scout out possible future furniture for the OZ sanctuary. People who live in the kibbutz but work elsewhere give their salaries to the kibbutz. They encourage people to have large families. The speaker describing this to us has seven children. Only about 20% of those born on the Kibbutz remain there.

We were welcomed into a home and fed traditional food in a Druze village. We learned that the Druze are a very different people and religion from Islam. We were welcomed, fed and entertained by Jewish settlers from Morocco and Kazakhstan. We witnessed an outdoor bar mitzvah celebration in the streets of Safed. We saw many young people in Israel's version of the scouts and in military uniforms. We met with a speaker, Paul Liptz, who said that Israel's success was due in large part to the importance Israelis have on family, good community connection, good health care and education. He also confirmed to me that more Jews are now born in Israel than outside of Israel.

We went to a school for children of temporary workers who overstayed their visas in Tel Aviv. These workers were brought to Israel when Arab labor was limited. Most of these children have their roots in Eritrea and the Philippines, but have lived their entire lives in Israel. They only speak Hebrew. Their school is one of the best performing in Israel. On one hand, the parents of these children overstayed their visas. On the other hand, this is the only home these children know. This is a problem found in many countries. The added concern in Israel is the fear by many of losing a Jewish majority.

We went into the Palestinian territories to the new city of Rawabi and learned that even what the land is called is controversial. Palestinians and many in the west call the land the West Bank as if it is still part of Jordan. Many Jews call the land by the historic name of Judea and Samaria. People who try to be polite just call the land the Territories. This land is in between the coastal plain and the steep decline in elevation into the rift valley.

The Territories are divided into areas called 'A', 'B', and 'C'. Ownership of area 'A' lands can be attributed to specific native landowners. Areas labeled as 'A' are administered by the Palestinian Authority. Area 'B', is jointly administered by the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Area 'C' is controlled by the IDF. Israeli settlements are in area 'C' land.

Rawabi is in area 'A', which like most Palestinian cities in the area is on a hilltop. Perhaps a good idea for defense, but it took a while to reach Rawabi on winding roads. The land is rocky and mostly barren. There are planted olive trees in many places. It is a beautiful new city that is trying to provide more affordable housing and to be a place of work and commerce. The project

is being managed by one of the richest people in Palestine, Bashar El Masri, with funding from Qatar.

Rawabi is a place of contrasts. It is providing much needed work for Palestinians through an Israeli tech company. They are providing desired shopping opportunities with western company boutiques. Masri could only get water from Israel instead of drilling wells to an underground aquifer. We would later hear Rabbi David Marcus, who lives in an Israeli settlement in the Territories, describe the fragility of the area aquifer and the fact that illegal use by many Palestinian cities will eventually destroy the aquifer.

About 60% of college degrees issued in Palestine are earned by women. Masri has provided many opportunities to women. Many in management are women, like his head engineer. Some of the more traditional Palestinians are not happy that women are given such an important role and that Masri has cooperated with Israel, while he will tell you that he is trying to solidify Palestine. There are many Palestinian flags set up in the city.

I got to see and touch the Kotel. I feel like I fulfilled the Pesach promise of next year in Jerusalem. I went with the group on a Friday afternoon when there were only a few dozen people by the Kotel. I went back myself on a Saturday morning and saw the wall about two or three deep of Orthodox men with the prayer books and stands. Even with that, I was able to maneuver my way to the Kotel to have a well thought out moment. I was thinking about how my maternal grandfather would be so happy to know I was there. I gave my son his Hebrew name.

I then had a chance to walk around and see much of the Jewish quarter. Later when I got home, I would measure some areas on Google Earth. The Kotel area is only about two acres. The entire Jewish quarter is about 26 acres. We were told that there are about 4,000 Jews living in the Jewish quarter, mostly orthodox students. The Jewish quarter is actually smaller than the Temple Mount area (about 34 acres) which we had a chance to visit on a later day. The population of the Jewish quarter is tiny compared to the 30,000 people in the Muslim quarter.

Visiting the Temple Mount was an interesting experience. After security we were seemingly rushed to the Al Aqsa Mosque. We were told that Al Aqsa means 'the edge' and that Mohammed came to 'the edge' in a vision. The edge has been interpreted as Jerusalem. He never actually traveled to Jerusalem. Then the guide quoted the book of Matthew story that blames the Jews for the death of Jesus. We wondered how many people this guide had told this story. The guide's father was also accompanying us. He would not recognize our Rabbi as a Rabbi. He instead called her the name for a Rabbi's wife. This was the last straw for many of us. You do not disrespect our Rabbi!

The centerpiece of the Temple Mount is the Dome of the Rock. Access to the rock is limited to Muslims. It is the high point of the area. One can see the ground sloping away from the Dome. Access to the Temple Mount area for Jews is limited to one access and one exit, while for Muslims there are multiple access and egress gates. There are no trees close to the Dome, probably because there is not enough earth between the surface and the rock to support trees. There are many olive trees in the more distant grounds of the Temple Mount area.

Of the many pictures I took, one of the most important to me was a view of the Temple Mount as we were leaving, looking back to the place we entered. It was a picture of the back side of the Kotel. Comparing several pictures, I realized that the top 60% of the Kotel has an above ground back side. It is a series of arches accessible from the Temple Mount. We were rushed to the Al Aqsa Mosque as to not touch the back side of the Kotel? If I went to touch the back side of the Kotel, would it start WW III? It seems that all that the Israelis and Jews want is a small piece of what is sacred and yet that is too much for many in the world to tolerate.

We also learned of the challenges for secular Jewish businesses in the Jerusalem area. We met a woman named Inbar Weiss, who was trying to keep young secular Jewish professionals, ages 24 to 38, in the Jerusalem area. Of the million people living in the Jerusalem area about 2/3 are Jewish and 1/3 are Muslim. About 2/3 of the Jews are Orthodox. Only about 20% of the overall Jewish population is secular Jews. Many businesses owned by secular Jews are drawn to Tel Aviv.

So Israel is a small place that always had a Jewish presence, that the Ottomans tried to destroy, that carried the hopes and dreams of a people who did not want to be victims anymore. Israel was a desolate place where Jews created an amazing modern country from scratch with a language that had to be reinvented and brought back native agriculture. It is a place where determined people gave their lives for Israel's survival. It is a place where people lived have lived the edge of disaster.

It is a place where many different groups of people try to live together with suspicion of others intentions, and many who are trying to build a better life in harmony with everyone. It is a place where even those who try to do good are met with suspicion. It is a place where people celebrate life because it is a place that is free. There are some from bad places who would like to share that freedom. It is a place where we can enjoy a small sliver of our historic religious past, which is too much for the world to accept. It is more secure than ever, but still perceived to be a place on the edge.

I could say so much more. We had a great group of people to share the experience. We still communicate with each other. A big thank you to Bill for being a great roommate. Thank you again Rabbi Amy for putting this together. I am already thinking about what I would like to do if I have the opportunity to return.

*~ Mitchel Cypes*