

Israel Trip

So many impressions, sensations, learnings, and reactions have been generated by our trip to Israel/Palestine and, for some of us, Jordan, it is hard to know where to begin.

This was not a typical trip designed to take in Israel's "top ten" tourist spots. Rather, due to Rabbi Amy's considerable contacts through the Hartman Institute and more, we had access to prominent people and experiences that the casual tourist would not have.

If I came with preconceived ideas, they were both reinforced and challenged. If I came looking for answers, there were none. The universal refrain would have to be, "It is complicated."

Some highlights of the trip for me were:

Meeting with advocate Jean Marc Liling, an Orthodox Jew and lawyer who represents asylum seekers and potential deportees. We met him in a school for children from dozens of different lands, which was itself inspiring. Jean Marc's work grows out of his commitment to the precepts of Torah, "welcoming the stranger." It raises the question of what kind of country Israel is to be—ethnically more homogenous or accepting of a diverse range of backgrounds, racial, religious, and socioeconomic.

Meeting with Tal Becker, senior fellow at Hartman. He was a presence in every negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians since they began. He spoke about "Two Narratives, One Land" with depth and wisdom. His knowledge of two cultures and their motivations and respect for both made it obvious that he would be an asset in any search for peace. At present he seemed resigned, as he believes most of the populace is, to the status quo, a standoff in which neither side has won or lost. "A tinderbox" is what I thought.

Time in Jerusalem, both with Dr. Elan Ezrachi and at an art gallery, run as a "safe" space for secular young Jerusalemites. Dr. Ezrachi gave us an overview of Jerusalem's modern history, from a dusty little village at the dawn of the 20th century, to the vibrant city it is today. The speaker at the gallery talked about the difficulties of attracting young, secular Jews to settle and work in Jerusalem where two-thirds of the population is either Modern Orthodox or Haredi (ultra Orthodox).

The West Bank Palestinian planned city of Rawabi. We met with Bashar El Masri, scion of a very wealthy, important Palestinian family. With major investment from Qatar, his own resources, and even some Israeli cooperation, he has built *ex nihilo* housing for 40,000, marketed to upscale young Palestinians, complete with a Roman-style amphitheater and an arcade of A-list brand shops. Just as Jewish settlers from Israel who live on what was Palestinian land before 1967, creating "facts on the ground" for the hoped-for Israeli annexation of "Judea and Samaria", El Masri is creating other "facts on the ground." Rawabi is his way of constructing a viable, vibrant economic foundation for a Palestinian state.

Shorashim-Roots-Judour. Here we heard about how neighboring villages—one Jewish, one Palestinian, work at transforming the situation on the ground by normalizing relations between their two communities. They are creating a new reality of mutual support, beyond coexistence, even in the context of the larger conflict around them. One moving example—when someone is killed by a "terrorist" on either side, community members offer support and attend the grieving rituals of the other.

Meeting with Gershon Baskin. Gershon has a long history as a dialogue activist. He was instrumental in negotiating the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. While others have given up on belief of the

efficacy of negotiations, Gershon believes it is necessary to keep analyzing what went wrong in previous negotiations, do it better, and, most of all not give up.

It was our final lecture, and it was good to end on a cautiously optimistic note.

There were many, many more meaningful, joyful, and insightful episodes on the trip, too numerous to describe here. Perhaps some of my other trip companions will.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning all the OZ travelers got along despite differences in style, physical ability, age, and political persuasion. This gives me hope that friendships formed will continue and that dialogue despite disagreement is possible in our synagogue community.

~ Barbara McGrew