

Stephen Wise Free Synagogue Mission to Israel 2017





Dear Fellow Travelers,

Even my pre-mission assurances that this trip would be exceptional paled in comparison to the actual journey. Together, we shared deep feelings of amazement, admiration, mourning, and awe. We visited historic sites that have given us greater understanding of our ancestors and ourselves. We listened to Israelis and people of other nationalities express their own unique perspectives. What we've accomplished in ten days in Israel cannot be accomplished in ten years in New York. There's nothing like Israel to create a sense of community and Jewish identity. Words cannot accurately and adequately describe it.

We will carry the memories of this mission with us for the rest of our lives. I hope that you will share them with your loved ones and other members of the Stephen Wise community, and that we each will return to Israel for further discoveries.

—Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch



Tel Aviv, Welcome Dinner, and Orientation

We embarked upon our Mission to Israel via El Al on a long but gentle flight taken by Jews representing the full spectrum of Jewish practice. We arrived in Tel Aviv and were greeted at the Tel Aviv Hilton with Israeli fruit, Israeli chocolate and a warm welcome. Good cheer abounded! Our jet lagged spirits were revived by the realization, after months of anticipation, that our adventure had begun.

After a short break for a walk along the Mediterranean shore or a brief introduction to the city, we convened for dinner together at the Beit Hasirot restaurant overlooking the Yarkon River, Israel's second biggest. There, we introduced ourselves, 100 strong, and enjoyed Rabbi Hirsch's introductory remarks. Rabbi Hirsch spoke of his hopes for the impact of the Mission on each of us in terms of spiritual and religious growth. He also spoke of returning to New York more engaged and committed to our Jewish identity and the State of Israel. We then enjoyed a meal featuring local cuisine and wine and caught up with old friends and with new friends, who already felt like old friends.

—*Patty Epstein, Alice Cunningham, and Tali Torres*



En Route to Eilat

Our journey began with a moving visit to the memorial for David Ben Gurion, father of modern Israel. He is buried near the kibbutz he joined at his retirement from public life.

The Ramon Crater is a breath-taking introduction to the geology of Israel. Formed when an inland sea suddenly drained because of tectonic plate movement, it's not really a "crater" but that's the closest term in English. The view is from high over the "sea" floor. We received a great introduction to our guide's breadth of knowledge from her descriptions of the geology, way beyond details of the history of Israel.

Moving on through the Arava desert, truly a wilderness, we visited Kibbutz Lotan, where environmental sensitivity has risen to an art. Their homes and facilities focus on minimizing use of natural resources, from solar powered ovens to compost toilets to environmentally sensitive gardening to controlling room temperatures through natural means .

We arrived in Eilat in late afternoon, with views of Aqaba from the hotel balconies. Lovely! Shabbat services over the harbor and a private Shabbat dinner capped a most special day.

—*Judy and Herbert Katz*



Sde Boker, Ramon Crater, Kibbutz Lotan, and Shabbat on the Beach

On March 24, we went on our drive down to Eilat. We stopped at many places on the way. The first stop was Sde Boker, where David Ben Gurion and his wife Paula are buried. We learned a little bit about Paula's relationship with David, and how he thought that the Negev would be the future for Israel. Then we stopped at Kibbutz Lotan and we learned about the environmentally conscious lifestyle at a Kibbutz. The kids went and made bricks out of mud. For lunch, we went to the beautiful Ramon Crater, and went on a daring drive through the crater. After that we arrived at the Royal Beach, Eilat with it's amazing view onto the Red Sea and three other countries. Lastly, we had Shabbat on the beach at the hotel, and then a delicious dinner at the hotel.

—*Judith Hecker and Matt Furmann*

(Photos by the Abramson Family)





The King's Road to Petra

Zead, our Jordanian guide, provided background on the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan and expertly explained geography on the way to Petra. We traveled the King's Road and felt the awesome power of the land as we followed the likely path that Moses and our ancestors walked on their way to the promised land. We also saw Aaron's tomb from afar.

Petra itself was remarkable. Seeing the details of the carvings in the mountains and learning about the Nabatean people painted a picture of an advanced society. Their collection and control of water (with aqueducts and pipe systems) was particularly impressive. During the two-hour drive to Petra, we saw many herds of goats along the land and road, as well as several Bedouin encampments.

—*Linda and Bruce Sachais*

(Photos by the Hirschfield/Warman Family)





Petra, Jordan

Have you ever gotten up early and endlessly stood or sat on the ground, a blanket, or beach chair in Central Park outside the Delacourte Theatre while waiting for tickets to summer shows in the Shakespeare in the Park series from the Public Theatre? Getting up early and going through the border crossing is a very similar process that stems (obviously) from a very different reason.

To leave Eilat and go to Petra one must spend 60-90 minutes passing through the security involved in leaving Israel and then walking through the "neutral zone" to go through the security involved in entering Jordan. If you want better seats for Shakespeare in the Park, you get going early - you want to be the first in line, although oddly no matter how early you arrive there's always someone else ahead of you. In Israel you really want to be on the first tour bus waiting for Israeli border control to open so that you and your 100 tour companions can get checked and through to the next step ASAP. Being the 150th person in line for Shakespeare in the Park tickets is no big deal - being the 150th person online for the border control office means you should pack a lunch. And maybe a snack.

Once cleared all the way through and on the Jordanian side we leave our Israeli guide and switch to a Jordanian tour guide. Unless you've spent your Jewish education studying the promised land from the views of Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians, and Israelis, your Jordanian tour guide will spend the 2.5hr bus ride relaying "similar history" but from a very different perspective (although most certainly without alternative facts.) Our guide was kind, knowledgeable, and eager to do his job well, but there was a tangible sense of his "otherness" on board with us for the first several minutes as he told jokes and puns but we didn't really respond. No one was rude, but a different-ness between us felt clearer at some points than others.



We haven't yet been to the marketplace in Jerusalem but I've been to enough European cities to notice a deep contrast between the majesty of our 2.5 mile walk "down" allowing us to descend into Petra (from the bus drop off) and the waves of peddlers-adults and children-urgently vying for us to purchase the souvenirs they were selling. It's not unlike trying to get from one side of Times Square to another and having to refuse offer after offer for tickets to comedy clubs or bus tours or photo ops with characters of some sort. While Petra is no Times Square, Times Square is no Petra, either.

Petra, Jordan (Continued)

Before we arrived, our guide asked us specifically to be polite and unequivocal when we inevitably declined the offers of the street vendors. To begin with, showing any hesitation or interest means they won't leave you alone until they make a sale and just as importantly, the guide comes through here all the time, so even though he recommends we buy nothing since it's mostly junk, he's got to stop and introduce us to "his dear friend who sells sand art" because it's his job to walk by this guy's stall every day and he needs to keep the vendors on his side, too.

So every stall we passed-in between 2000-year-old sandstone carvings on the walls-I was very consistent with my "No thank you's" and wondered if when I go back home I'll be as polite to the Naked Cowboy who mistakenly thinks I might want a selfie with him.

—Laurie and Howell Weschler





Masada and the Dead Sea

On Sunday, March 26, our family of nine (three generations) started out bright and early in the southern most point of Israel at the Red Sea port of Eilat and ended the day in northern Israel at Ramot in the Golan Heights. It was a remarkable day for all of us, which included stops at historic Masada and the Dead Sea.

Our day, which included a long hike up Masada (other less ambitious members of the family took the cable car!!!), left us with many lasting impressions. Two of the most thought provoking to us were the roles of both both water and memory in Jewish/Israeli life.

The vital impact of water on past and present day Israel is very striking. Starting our day in Eilat which is a critical window for Israeli trade with important markets in Asia and Africa, we drove through the Arava and Negev. One can't but be impressed by the barrenness interrupted from time to time by the occasional Kibbutz or industrial location. As we moved North toward Masada, we came across the well organized evaporation ponds south of the Dead Sea used to extract important minerals from the water. At this point we came to the impressive fortress of Masada with its elaborate water system which enabled the Sicari to hold out against overwhelming Roman forces for three months.

From Masada we moved on to the Dead Sea which is, unfortunately shrinking rapidly as water from it's main source, the Jordan River, is diverted for other uses. The area is also suffering from reduced water flow from local rainfall. As a result, we had a long walk from the former shoreline down to the Sea's edge before we could "take a float."



Masada and the Dead Sea (Continued)

As we drove North through the Jordan valley our peerless tour educator, Jeremy Aaron, referred to the Jordan River (with tongue firmly in cheek) as the “mighty, mighty, mighty Jordan River”. Suddenly we were surrounded by abundant fields benefitting from the very same river. We then approached the primary source of the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and the lush areas surrounding it. This one day trip underlined for us the fragility and resourcefulness of the State of Israel currently and in ancient times in dealing with this vital resource.

Jeremy pointed out, for the first of several times, that “Jews don’t have history, they have memory.” That memory, rather than history, is how the Jewish culture has survived and, in fact, thrived even when the events of history have tried to eliminate that memory. We were struck by the symbolic importance that both of these places have for Israel. Masada being a fortress of the past that resisted and tested the faith of its last inhabitants and, the Dead Sea, which is one of the most iconic natural landmarks in Israel, that is sadly disappearing which makes its memory that much more important. We were all enriched by a day filled with historical significance, beauty and fun.

—*The Kubie/Harrison Family*



Adventures by the Dead Sea

We left Eilat bright and early at 7:30 this morning, for a three-hour bus ride through the desert, passing the Dead Sea Works to Masada. When we arrived we separated into two groups with our guides, with some going in the cable car to the top and others making the arduous trek by foot on what is called the "snake path." At the top, our guides educated us on the history of Masada, raising thought-provoking questions. We saw structures such as store rooms, the cistern, the synagogue, and the mikvah. We learned about how archaeologists created a line along the walls to show the walls as they found them versus how they have been restored.

Then we went to the Dead Sea, where we made our way through the slippery mud and floated on the water. Many of us rubbed mud on our bodies and enjoyed the novel experience. After a quick shower in the communal showers, we changed out of our swim suits, made a stop for ice cream and sea salt products, and hopped back on the bus for a two-hour drive to Ramot, made seemingly quicker by the elucidative commentary by our guide, Jeremy. We arrived at the hotel, enjoying a beautiful sunset upon arrival, and had a very tasty buffet dinner in the dining room before retiring for the evening.

—*The Popick/Pecarsky Family*



Jericho

Starting from Eilat, our first stop was a solar-powered gas station with a store that sold delicious local dates and what our terrific guide, Mike Hollander, described as a basic food group for Israeli children: chocolate milk. The milk comes from cows at nearby kibbutzim, including Kibbutz Lotan, which we visited yesterday. It has deservedly earned the highest possible chocolate milk rating from Israeli school kids.

We then drove north along the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is still an important source of minerals for Israel and Jordan, but has been shrinking due to diversion of water from the Jordan River for agriculture. We passed Masada but did not stop there (the other group did that). Mike told us about the Jewish and Greco-Roman influences in King Herod's reign, the Jewish revolt against the Romans after Herod's death, and the factions that arose among the Jews (including the Zealots who died at Masada). As we neared Jericho, a Palestinian-controlled city in the West Bank, Mike recounted the history of the negotiations that have led to the current division of the West Bank into three zones: A (autonomous Palestinian), C (Israeli-controlled), and B (small rural Palestinian villages under local Palestinian control and Israeli military control).





Our group was then joined by Rami Nazzal, a Palestinian journalist, partly raised and educated in the U.S., who writes for the New York Times and other publications. He described his personal experiences as a Palestinian child and adult and his efforts over the years to build understanding between Palestinians and Israelis, commenting that the main problem today is that there is "no interaction between the two peoples." He told us about his work on several recent articles in the New York Times, including Smugglers in West Bank Open Door to Jobs in Israel, and Violence, and Solar Project Pairs Muslims and Jews to Aid West Bank Farmers.

He described the bleak conditions in the Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, emphasizing the inadequate educational facilities, high unemployment, and apparent misapplication of resources by the Palestinian National Authority. He noted that some people in these camps are from families that have been refugees for generations and still have keys to homes they left in 1948.

Jericho (Continued)

Rami accompanied us to what used to be a synagogue in Jericho. What's left of it is a beautiful 7th century mosaic tile floor which was rediscovered in 1967 after the Six Day War. The site has been under Palestinian control since 1994. Access by Jews is only possible by special permit, which is difficult to obtain. Upstairs was a dusty room with a few shelves of sidurim and other religious books, which had obviously not been used for study or any other purpose in a long time.

We then had an excellent lunch at a Palestinian restaurant, in a leafy outdoor courtyard with a live musician playing an oud, which is a kind of lute.

After lunch, we met with Xavier Abu Eid, Communications Advisor to the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.





Xavier, a Palestinian Christian who has worked in the negotiations department for eight of its 24 years, expressed his view that the possibility of a two-state solution is in doubt. His most strongly worded assertion was that the settlements in the West Bank were "built on stolen land using stolen natural resources" and involved "war crimes." In response to various questions from the group, he criticized Israel as an occupying force.

After the meeting, when we were back on the bus, Rabbi Hirsch, Rami and Mike provided important context for Xavier's assertions. We drove on to our hotel in the Golan Heights, overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

—*Pamela Jarvis and Anthony Davis*

Communal B'nai Mitzvah Celebration, Jeep Tour, and Tastings

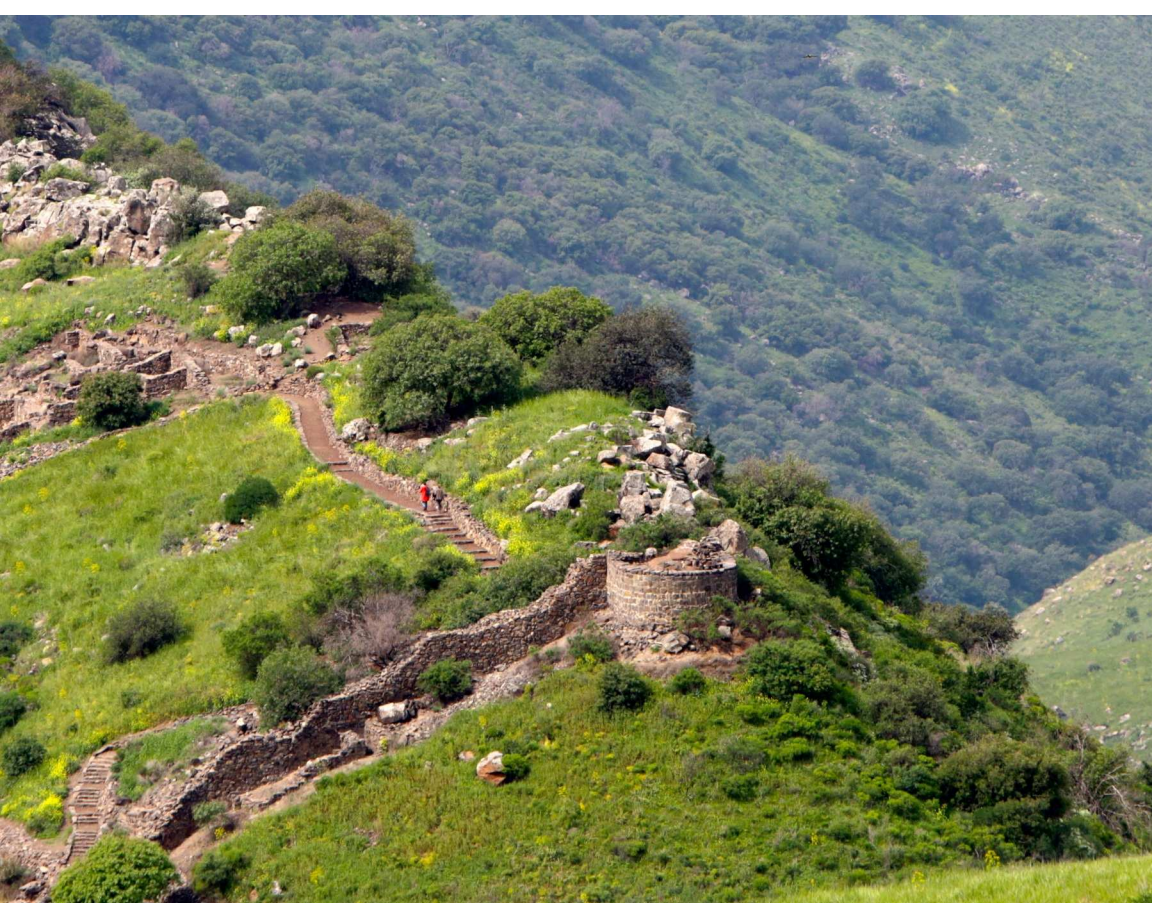
Waking up to the sun breaking over the Sea of Galilee, in the Golan Heights and a lovely buffet breakfast in Ramot.

In March, the Golan – annexed in 1981 after conquering from Syria in 1967 & again in 1973 – are lush and green. The rolling hills are blanketed with mustard seed, poppies and buttercups. In a few months, we are told the green will become yellow and brown, under the powerful Mediterranean Sun. From our trusty bus, we see hilltops where the ancients used a series of fires to mark the beginning of each new Jewish month. In the distance Mount Hebron, mostly in Syria, is still covered in snow.

We are headed to Gamla to celebrate a community B'nai Mitzvah. Gamla is called the Masada of the North because of the brave sacrifices made by the inhabitants fighting a losing battle against the Roman army. Set against the spectacular backdrop of a dramatic view of the valley, the B'nai Mitzvah ceremony is emotional and inspiring, with many children in the congregation participating in the service.

After a casual picnic lunch, we begin a jeep tour of the Syrian border. Along a long, low, barbed wire fence, we pass signs warning of land mines. Stopping from time to time, we look down into Syria and see towns controlled by Assad. As Jeremy, our guide, explains the war's convoluted history, we can hear the regular bursts of automatic weapons fire – a sound in stark contrast to the bucolic beauty of the landscape.

From the jeeps, we headed off to Kibbutz Ein Ziwan for wine and chocolate! Kids attend a chocolate workshop while the adults indulge in a wine tasting paired with local cheeses.



*Communal B'nai Mitzvah Celebration, Jeep Tour, and Tastings
(Continued)*

After wine and chocolate, we drive to a military base where the kids enjoy an opportunity to climb in and around armored personnel carriers and elite tanks. Then Nir, a sergeant in 1973 Yom Kippur war, recounts a remarkable story about defeating the Syrians while being grossly outnumbered. We learn that that war changed Israeli view of military order and preparedness.





Leaving the Golan, after crossing the "mighty, mighty" Jordan River, we end the long and eventful day with a surprise celebratory dinner in the Hula Valley. Under white tents festooned with lights and filled with long communal tables, we feast and then enjoy live music. As per custom, the congregation lifts the B'nai Mitzvah celebrants in chairs and joins hands to dance the Hora, along with gun-toting members from the military base we had visited earlier in the day. We even have a birthday cake for Kim Spodek.

A memorable and remarkable day.

—*The Grant Family*

Communal B'nai Mitzvah Celebration and Meeting With Tank Commander

Our day began with a short ride to the beautiful, ancient and fortified mountain town of Gamla, named for its camel-like silhouette. Rabbi Hirsch selected this site for our trip's b'nai mitzvah ceremony, a poignant return by our mission to a battlefield where the Romans believed they had nearly vanquished the Jewish people in the year 68 CE. Gamla was one of the final Jewish holdouts and obstacles in the path of the Romans as they marched towards Jerusalem and their eventual destruction of the Second Temple.

As we gazed out over the remnants of the city walls and the excavated remains of the Gamla synagogue (one of a minority that coexisted with the Second Temple) we were treated to a moving service and multiple Torah readings by a uniformly competent and impressive group of b'nai mitzvah, including: Jade Abramson, Jesse Eick, L.J. and Thomas Grant, Eve Hammerman, Marisa Hirschfield, Riley Hochwald, Jonah Samton, Ainsley Scheiner, Mason Spodek, Jessica Topkis, and Ethan Zirinsky.



Thomas, L.J. and Jonah proceeded to educate us with inspiring d'var Torah, all of which revolved around the theme of sacrifice. We were asked to reflect on the personal sacrifices each of us must make in our daily lives, as well as the sacrifices our ancestors made to insure the remarkable continuity of the Jewish people. As the rabbi and the b'nai mitzvah participants noted, we, the Jewish people, have out-survived many seemingly more powerful foes.



After this meaningful experience at Gamla, we visited the family run Assaf Winery in a panoramic 13 acre Golan Heights setting. Once the home to only three wine producers, Israel now has over 300 wineries. At large communal tables surrounded by fermentation tanks, we enjoyed four varieties of wine and learned about the wine-making process.



*Communal B'nai Mitzvah Celebration and Meeting With Tank Commander
(Continued)*

Following our delicious wine tasting, we were joined by a retired IDF Lt. Colonel who described to us the highly unusual humanitarian role Israel has assumed along the border with Syria by providing medical care to wounded Syrians. We were all moved by the Lt. Colonel's remarks and left feeling very proud to be associated with the Jewish homeland, where soldiers are risking their own lives to help victims who would normally be considered enemies of Israel.

We then made our way to the spot overlooking the Syrian border town of Kunetra. We were struck by how close we were to areas within Syria where the Assad regime and rebel groups are, at times, engaged in battle. From our vantage point it seemed very peaceful, yet we all recognized the tragedy that was occurring just beyond the fence that bisected the valley below us.





Our day concluded with a celebratory dinner in a large outdoor tent, complete with Israeli music, dancing and, most interestingly, the company of soldiers from the local base. Capping off a day spent seeing and learning about the vulnerability of the Jewish state but also its military might and humanitarian core, we all felt a deep debt of gratitude to the young uniformed men and women who joined us to celebrate our b'nai mitzvah.

—*The Eick and Eppel Family and Beth Gelfond*



Nahalal Farm and Caesarea

There once was a group from New York
Who went to the land of no pork
We ate hummus and schwarma
To get the right karma
And observed red poppies, ibexes and stork

Day seven, it's tikkun olam
At Nahalal farm in the sun
We jumped out of our seats
And picked bushels of beets
To feed those who are poor and have none

In Caesarea we saw plenty of stones
From 2000 years before iPhones
A palace ornate
From Herod the great
A big theater and huge hippodrome

And last, to a place with a view
Of a land claimed by both Arab and Jew
The solution's a mystery
Given the history
And the UN does not have a clue

—*Herb Freedman*

(Photos by Richard and Janice Oppenheimer)



Nahalal Farm and Palestinian City Visit

Day 7 was Yom Ma'asim Tovim, the day of good deeds, when Israelis of all ages forgo their regularly scheduled activities to work to help those in need.

All 100 of us on the Mission eagerly joined in! Under the auspices of Leket, a volunteer organization that distributes over 2 million meals a year to the needy throughout the country, we harvested beets on a Moshav (cooperative farm) in the Jazreel Valley. We thoroughly enjoyed doing our part and plunging our hands into the Israeli soil, beet juice stains and all.





Then bus 3 drove south on the Trans Israeli Highway along the Security Barrier between Israel and the Palestinian Territories to the Arab city of Tayibe in the middle of Israel. We removed our shoes and the women wrapped scarves around their heads to enter the mosque. Our local guide explained the 5 Pillars of Islam and the practices revolving around Ramadan.

Then at City Hall we met with Mayor Shuad Mansour and Deputy Mayor Jabar El Hakim. They are responsible for bringing about great improvements in Tayibe's infrastructure, education system, commercial and industrial areas, and reducing the crime rate. Sixty percent of Tayibe's budget is now spent on education. Unheard of in any other city! The people are very proud that their town was released from Israeli control of local affairs and could elect their own mayor.

Both mayors and our local guide proudly identify as Palestinian Muslims who live in Israel. However, if a two state solution ever comes about Mayor Mansour wants Tayibe to remain within Israel because the economics are better and there is far less corruption in the government. But Israeli Arabs want Israel to be more respectful of their identity.

Nahalal Farm and Palestinian City Visit (Continued)



When asked directly, both mayors expressed concern over the unpredictability of President Trump based on his public statements. They also stated it will cause tremendous disruption if the American embassy is moved to Jerusalem.

We moved on for lunch at the bright airy home of Nehma Finkelshtein. Lunch was delicious and the family gracious hosts, but it was Nehma Finkelshtein's story that we found compelling. She is an Egyptian Jewish woman brought to Israel by her family as a baby. At age 16 she met Yossi, a 21 year old Muslim Arab. They immediately fell in love. Her parents did everything they could to keep them apart and were successful for a year. They met again and eloped to Cypress (Arabs and Jews cannot legally marry in Israel).

“Wisely,” Nehma said, her in-laws invited the couple into their home and embraced them as members of the family. The community welcomed them. Nehma, “wanted to show the people of Tayibe the good face of the Jews.” So she taught the women how to drive which was very important to them and started the first preschool.

Nehma and Yossi made a marriage and a life together in Tayibe with their four children and eleven grandchildren. Her parents and siblings eventually came to accept the couple. Sadly, Nehma is widowed now, but she chooses to remain in Tayibe. She identifies as a Jewish woman and has kept her name. But she says her children and grandchildren are and should be Muslim because they live in this town.

Nehma left us with these thoughts, “If you don’t know someone, you cannot love them. You only think about the bad situation. It is a bad situation because Arabs and Jews do not know each other. People all have the same problems, with children, with work. The solution has to come from people, not the government.” If only we could put the wisdom of this lovely, generous woman into practice.

—*Ruth and Joe Dalven*



Jerusalem Old City Tour

We started our tour of Old Jerusalem at Zion's Gate and visited what some believe to be King David's tomb. Jeremy, Bus #2's fearless leader, explained that if "you want history buy a book, let yourself experience Jerusalem, don't get caught up in facts and figures." At Zion's gate, Jeremy summed up the significance of our visit by explaining that until 1967, it had been 2,000 years since a Jew could freely and easily touch the Western Wall, one of the four walls that surrounded the perimeter and the closest wall to the destroyed Temple and the Holy of Holies (the Dome of the Rock).

We proceeded to an overlook of the Wall and said the Shehecheyanu, made a blessing over the wine and drank a glass of grape juice to commemorate our first visit to the Western Wall together. From there, we visited the Jerusalem Archaeological Park, watched a video of the mustache-less bearded man's reenactment of his pilgrimage to and his sacrifice at Herod's great Temple. Gathered around the museum's diorama of Jerusalem, Jeremy gave a riveting explanation of the rock at the center of the Temple Mount and its importance to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The group listened intently to the history of Jerusalem from the time of the Crusaders through the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many of us commented on the lesson that despite the destruction of the Jewish Temple and its significance in the history of the Jews, when the Arabs attacked Israel in 1967 and the Israeli army took Jerusalem, Moshe Dayan ordered the troops not to destroy the Dome of the Rock or the Mosque, emphasizing that the war was about independence and was between Israelis and Arabs, not Jews and Muslims. It was not a jihad.

Next, we discussed inserting a note in the Western Wall and it being an opportunity to have a private conversation with G-d. After writing our notes, we descended into the Kotel through security, separated by gender and spent personal time at the Wall and inserting our notes into the stones.



Jerusalem Old City Tour (Continued)

From there, we separated for lunch in the Jewish Quarter, wondering through the Cardo (visiting Jewish shops along this main street of 6th Century Jerusalem) and through the Arab Quarter markets. Some members of the group took a tour of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

While most members of the group continued their exploration of Jerusalem or took a few hours to relax at the King David Hotel, a small group visited the United Hatzalah headquarters to learn about Israel's fully volunteer Emergency Medical Services that reach emergencies in under three minutes by utilizing ambucycles (fully equipped medical motorcycles) and electrical bicycles to get through traffic and hard to reach areas before ambulances can arrive. We toured the dispatch room, learned about United Hatzalah's cutting edge technology and saw the progress of the new high tech dispatch center (which includes an underground bomb shelter). The session ended with a dedication ceremony for the newest ambucycle donated by a family of one of the Stephen Wise congregants. Another jam-packed, educational and amazing day of the Stephen Wise Israel Mission 2017!

—*The Spodek Family*

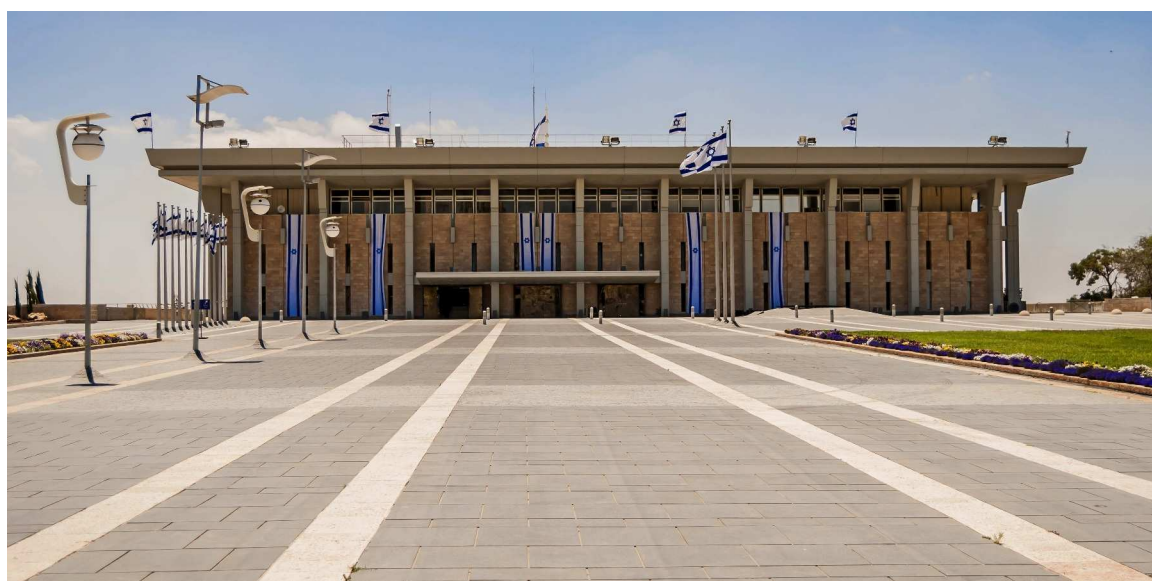


Knesset and West Bank

March 29, a day that has been both humbling and intense. From an early morning glimpse of the sun rising over the Old City to a late afternoon visit to Shiloh in the West Bank, that place where the Holy Tabernacle was erected by the Israelites 3,000 years ago, it has been a day of profound connection to a past that is our heritage. From the spot where we stood in Shiloh, located in Judea, a short distance from Jerusalem, we looked to the west and south at adjacent mountaintops where the Maccabees once fought. We looked down at the excavation site, where archaeological evidence tells the story we read in the Book of Judges. "And the whole congregation of the children of Israel assembled at Shiloh and erected the tent of meeting there." (Joshua, 18.1)



It has been a day of pride in Jewish values as exemplified by the work of IsraAID, an Israeli humanitarian organization dedicated to providing critical help to those in need, whenever and wherever it is needed in the aftermath of a crisis -- most recently in Lesbos, Greece and Germany as refugees arrive from Syria. Navonel Glick, Co-CEO of IsraAID, met with us to share highlights of the work being done by Israeli doctors and nurses speaking Hebrew and Arabic, who provide immediate and often ongoing medical and emotional assistance to those who have been forced by violence to flee their homeland. In all they do, IsraAID works to repair the world.



It has been a day of contrasting perspectives, with particular regard to views shared by members of the Knesset and the media. In the morning, we dialogued at the Israel Democracy Institute with MK Benny Begin from the Likud Party. Later, during a brief stop at the Knesset, we spoke with MK Michal Biran from the Zionist Union Party. In the evening, we met with Aluf Benn, editor-in-chief of Ha'aretz, who presented his assessment of life and politics in Israel today. Despite their differing perspectives on a variety of issues, the speakers were clearly united by a strong commitment to this remarkably pluralistic land that so many call home.

—Beth Gerson and M. David Isaak

Jaffa and Tel Aviv

Twenty-six feet below Kibbutzim Hill lies the remains of a clandestine operation, the Ayalon Institute. Despite the constant eye of the British, who forbid the production of weapons by Jews or Arabs, early Zionists worked tirelessly in a secret factory to create over 2,000,000 bullets to win the battle for their new homeland. These bullets would later be used in the “Sten,” the personal weapon of the soldiers in the 1948 War of Independence. While other members of the kibbutz carried on their daily activities, these heroic women and men descended into a dark and cavernous space to ensure they could properly arm the defenders of Israel.

Following our trip to the Ayalon Institute, we stopped in Jaffa, the ancient city mentioned in the Bible (in the Story of Jonah), in Egyptian texts and Greek myths. We toured an artist colony and saw the famous flying tree. After a shawarma and falafel lunch, we headed to Tel Aviv where we visited Independence Hall. Our tour guide gave a vivid account of how David Ben Gorion, Golda Meir, and many others worked tirelessly to make Theodore Herzl’s science fiction fantasy of a country of Zion a reality. Herzl’s famous quotation, “If you will it, it is not a dream” permeated our hearts and minds as we heard an audio of Ben Gurion reading the Israeli Declaration of Independence. We rose and sang Hatikva with new appreciation for what others sacrificed for our homeland.

—*The Samton and Elsberg Families*



Tel Aviv, Hand in Hand Academy, and Meeting with Alon Pinkas

The days have been flying by.

On "Bus Three" today, we began our day at an amazing place. At "Hand in Hand" Israeli and Palestinian children learn together in an eye opening, caring, progressive environment.

We saw Jewish, Christian and Muslim kids actually comparing pictures of Passover and Easter. We sat in the round and spoke with a young Jewish girl as she described how this co-learning has changed her life, creating serious friendships with other Jewish and Arab students that she feels connected to, while still understanding their differences.

She stressed how important it is to have a dialogue with each other. We saw how the school dealt with extreme vandalism when three Jewish boys broke in and lit two classrooms on fire - and how the reaction was an outpouring of support and love from both Israelis and Palestinians immediately after the violence.

We left there and had lunch en route to Tel Aviv. Our first speaker was a Gay Iranian poet, Payam Feili who fled to Israel to escape persecution and death. He loves Israel and although came here illegally, he decided to stay over going to the U.S. where he had housing and a living stipend.

He spoke about life of the Jews in Iran for the Jews before the revolution- and how now, the Iranians actually "still love the Jews," but only in secret, stating that only the government hates Israel.



We ended our amazing day of learning with a lecture from Alon Pinkas, the former advisor to the Consul General. After a week of many facets and views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he left us with two possible ideas that if I tried to sum them up, I would for sure leave out an important detail!

After a coffee break and amazing photo exhibit, we drove to Saroná for a chance to wander its markets for a fun eclectic dinner of wandering and noshing before heading back to Jerusalem. It was yet another great day!

—*The Hochwald and Stone Family*

Yad Vashem, Shabbat Service, and Dinner at Modi'in

Friday was a day marked by remembrance of the darkest days of the Jewish people and a direct experience of the living and hopeful present of Israel.

We began at Yad Vashem. It's impossible to describe in a blog post the profound impact of this memorial and exhibit. Our guide Lana explained that the designers of this exhibit—which was entirely remade in 2005—chose to educate rather than shock or manipulate, and chose to be as specific and personal as possible. Rather than deal in generalities, the exhibit focuses on specific names, events, places, documents and artifacts. It is full of photos and names from Jewish life both before, during and after the Shoah. We saw a lavish collection of the household goods of an esteemed physician in Berlin who lost his position due to the Nazis and escaped. We learned of a survivor of the Shoah who recognized herself in one of the displayed photos found in the pockets of victims and learned for the first time that her boyfriend, who carried the photo to his death, had loved her. We saw a Nazi list of the numbers and locations of Jews alive in Europe, noting that they listed even Albania with only 200 Jews, and by 1941 had already rendered Estonia "Jew free." We saw the speech given by the leader of the Lodz ghetto where he begged his fellow Jews to surrender their children under the age of 8 and older people above 60 to meet the quota for the Nazi death camps in order to avoid wholesale liquidation—an impossibly tragic choice.

Then we learned of the struggles for entry of the survivors into Palestine under the British and the creation of the State of Israel. Perhaps most powerful of all was the room of photos and names, with binders containing the details on 4 million confirmed victims of the Shoah.



Yad Vashem, Shabbat Service, and Dinner at Modi'in (Continued)

After remarks from Rabbi Hirsch and reciting Kaddish, our group moved on to enjoy the life of modern day Israel. At the bustling market neighborhood of Mechane Yehuda we jostled in the crowds of people of every walk of Jerusalem life. Then we rested up for Shabbat.

We celebrated Shabbat at the Reform Jewish congregation of Yozma in the beautiful town of Modi'in. After a service that was quite familiar and an insightful D'var Torah which was distributed in English translation as well as given in Hebrew, we sat down to a community dinner with this lovely congregation, which operates a Reform Jewish Day School with 700 children.

The synagogue families were joyful and welcoming. Seating was arranged to ensure that all of the Stephen Wise members were seated with at least one Israeli family. Ainsley and I were seated with Yuval, two of her children (one an IAF officer, the other a high schooler), her mother in law who was a New Yorker and former Stephen Wise member, and a family friend also visiting from the US. We were quite relaxed with this family and learned about life as a Reform community in Israel.

Yuval who is a native Israeli is very involved with maintaining connections with the American Jewish Reform community. Her husband (who was traveling in the US at the time) is from America and her children have attended Reform Jewish camps in the US. We learned that the Reform Jewish movement in Israel is gaining ground with rapid growth, finding fertile ground among nominally "secular" Israelis who want to practice their religious heritage in an inclusive and egalitarian Jewish tradition. This evening with the Yozma community was an exciting and personal way to experience the vibrant life of Israel, make new friends, and usher in a wonderful Shabbat.

—Alan and Ainsley Scheiner



Jerusalem Light Rail, Yehuda Market, Shabbat Service, and Dinner at Modi'in

We started the day with a talk titled "The Labyrinth of Israeli Politics." It was a dialogue with Professor Reuven Hazan of the Political Science Department at Hebrew University. Professor Hazan explained how the Israeli parliamentary system differs from our constitutional government and our two party system. The voting in Israel is across a spectrum of blocks representing far left to far right ideas, with each composed of several parties. Voting is spread across this larger number of party candidates and a majority government is formed from a coalition based upon the outcome of the popular vote. The primary concern is always security and consequently Israeli governments tend to reflect the politics and threat level of the region very directly.





At 10 a.m. we embarked on a tour entitled "One City, Two States, Three Religions, and Four Quarters". We boarded the relatively new Jerusalem light rail system at the station in the Pisgat Ze'ev neighborhood. The journey took us through the Arab villages of Shuaafat & Beit Hanina, and the Ultra-Orthodox Area of Ramot Eshkol. We got off and on the train at several stops where we were struck by the contrast between the Arab and Jewish stations. Many of the Arab stations have been vandalized as symbolic protests against the government. The light rail system cuts across Palestinian neighborhoods which were part of Jordan prior to the 1967 war and Jewish neighborhoods on the Israeli side of the pre 1967 border. Now these quadrants all fall within Jerusalem, but the Palestinians live in completely separate worlds from the adjoining Jewish quarters. There is almost no interaction between the two groups across the boundary lines. The only time when when these populations seem to mix is on the light rail system. The resulting contrast is striking, as passengers from different neighborhoods board the train at different stations.

Jerusalem Light Rail, Yehuda Market, Shabbat Service, and Dinner at Modi'in (Continued)

We had a chance to experience and learn first-hand about the mosaic and diversity of the Jerusalem population with our leader, Mike Hollander.

Mike pointed out the differences between East and West Jerusalem, and the ongoing struggles between the different communities of the city. We got off the train at the Ammunition Hill station, which is in the ultra orthodox quarter. We visited the Museum on the Seam, which stands on the pre-1967 border between Israel and Jordan. From the roof of the Museum, we were able to overlook the entire city and see how the historical conflicts between Jews and Palestinians have resulted in a pattern of adjoining areas with conflicting cultures and religious characteristics. We walked near the Meir Sherim neighborhood where different and competing Chasidic groups live within a small enclave set off from modern Jerusalem.





From the Ammunition Hill Station, the train traveled along the Old City wall, and we disembarked at the Machaneh Yehuda Market. We experienced the sights, smells, and tastes of Jerusalem. While walking through both the Machaneh Yehuda open-air and covered markets selling all varieties of produce, sweets, nuts and spices. We were able to have lunch at the many food stalls throughout the market. The market was bustling and crowded with shoppers preparing food for the approaching Shabbat.

We then returned to the hotel to prepare for Shabbat services in Mike Hollander's hometown of Modi'in. It was wonderful to experience Kabbalat Shabbat services at Kehillat Yozma in Modi'in, with singing and prayer. This was followed by a communal Shabbat dinner with local congregants. Everyone from the congregation was so warm and welcoming to us. We ended the evening having made new friends.

We returned to Jerusalem and the King David after a long and satisfying day.

—*Donna and Martin Rich*

Shabbat in Jerusalem and Farewell Dinner

Our last day in Israel—Shabbat in Jerusalem. Our group, varied in ages and interests, embarked on a range of activities to learn, be spiritually moved, internally inspired, or to just have some fun. The streets of Jerusalem are quiet and the pace of this city distinctly different, occasionally dotted by small groups of families walking to synagogue, men in tallit.

Torah Study with Rena Rifkin was totally out-of-the-box. This group walked to the Machaneh Yehuda open-air market (AKA ‘the shuk’), which on a typical day is a crowded labyrinth of vegetable stands, spice vendors, specialty shops and restaurants. But during Shabbat, with the businesses closed and their metal shutters down, the shuk quietly transforms into a gigantic graffiti art gallery. Local artist Solomon Souza, with permission from the owners, has been spray painting vibrant murals of everything from rabbis and biblical scenes to Israeli prime ministers and movie stars like Roseanne Barr and Paul Newman on their shutters. His goal: to create a canvas that will let us taste all the flavors of the Jewish culture, with each community and tradition represented as authentically as possible. Unexpected, the murals were enjoyed by all—young and old—who took as many photographs as there were murals.



Others travelled to the Israel Museum, the State of Israel's national museum. Home to the Dead Sea Scrolls and other artifacts discovered at Masada, it is one of the leading art and archaeological museums in the world. Those who toured with educator Jeremy Aron came away in awe (with many suggesting that this museum be part of future tracks and not optional)—and with fewer shekels in their pockets after shopping in the museum's gift shop.



Another option was exploration of Christian East Jerusalem on foot with guide Hana Bendcowsky from the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Christian Relations. Hana, an Israel born Orthodox Jew, is an expert in the history of Christianity, in particular as it relates to Israel, with a well-deserved reputation as a gifted teacher. Upon first meeting her at the Jaffa Gate, she explained how the different orthodox Christian groups (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Coptic, etc.) each have a place and what their position is in Jerusalem today. As with everything else learned about on our mission, once one dug a little deeper into the history of the Christians we saw how much more complicated the separate groups are than we had realized. Walking through the streets of the Christian quarter toward the church of the Holy Sepulchre, we learned how to distinguish the different sects by their clothing, flags, carvings in the buildings etc. We toured the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Christians believe Jesus was crucified, where his body was cleaned and the place from which he rose, along with throngs of excited and fervent tourists and pilgrims of all types.

Shabbat in Jerusalem and Farewell Dinner (Continued)

Back at the hotel, some of our younger children played at the hotel playground with new friends made during the trip, while others from our group enjoyed the magnificent pool (and intermittent sunshine) at the King David Hotel, lunch on the patio, or free time to just pack and prepare for our closing session and check-out.



We ended the day as one group—with a festive Middle-Eastern farewell dinner at restaurant Naura, located in the Arab village of Abu Ghosh, just outside of Jerusalem. Versus our first dinner together in Tel Aviv nine days earlier, our group now had a distinctly different vibe. Whereas our children sat with their parents that first evening, this time our children sat together as one group of friends (regardless of age) at their own tables.

There was warmth and laughter in the room among all—as wine, bread, and dishes of hummus, eggplant, skewered chicken and beef, lamb chops and more were passed around the table. We celebrated each other—and three birthdays among us with sparklers instead of candles. Buses were boarded and off to the airport we went. Our ten-day mission in Israel complete. We leave with so much more than we came with—new friends, a better understanding of the State of Israel, a deeper spiritual and emotional identification with our people, and inspiration to continue our learning and commitment to our faith.

—*The Zirinsky Family and Jonathan and Faye Silbermann*





Stephen Wise Free Synagogue