

A Rabbi, a Priest and a Minister Go To Israel...

Greensboro Interfaith Clergy Pilgrimage to Israel December 2008

At the end of the gospel of Matthew, two women come to Jesus's tomb looking for him, and the angel says to them: "He is not here, He has risen."

The theme of our trip was – "he is not here – he is in the gift shop."

In early December, 22 ministers and 3 rabbis and some spouses, all from Greensboro, made a religious pilgrimage to *Eretz Yisrael*. The trip had four goals:

- To explore together the context of early Judaism and early Christianity;
- To make a religious pilgrimage in the land of our ancestors;
- To gain an appreciation of modern Israel;
- and to develop relationships through this shared experience, among Greensboro's clergy .

The first thing we did after leaving the airport, was to stop in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, and recite the *Shehecheyanu*

–We explained that Jews have blessings that we recite at "wow" moments, that serve to heighten and focus our gratitude for what we are experiencing. . So we stopped in the square, in the midst of pigeons and baby strollers and under the warm Tel Aviv sun, and reflected on the who we were bringing with us to this moment – our congregations, and for many of us, our families – our parents and grandparents who might have spoken and dreamed of coming to the Holy Land, but we were the ones who were fortunate to make this pilgrimage. We were determined to be not tourists, but pilgrims. And we recited a *beracha* thanking God for keeping us in life and sustaining us, and allowing us to reach this moment, and this place. And then we went and ate falafel.

After Rabin Square, we travelled to Independence Hall, a small museum in Tel Aviv, formerly the home of the mayor, which served as the meeting place to declare the new State of Israel in 1948. The docent told the moving narrative of the pre-State years and the early struggles of the Jewish State, and its *raison d'être* as a haven for Jews, a challenge to build a creative modern Jewish culture, and a democratic society for all of its inhabitants. We were especially moved by an old photo of fifty Jewish families who set out from the old city of Jaffa to build the new city of Tel Aviv, on top of barren sand dunes. Today Tel Aviv is a bustling modern city of 400,000, celebrating its centennial year. Some of our group was familiar with the story and history of Modern Israel, and some less so – Independence Hall was a good introduction to the modern State of Israel.

When I say "we" in talking about this trip, let me clarify: The trip was mostly planned by Rabbi Fred Guttman. Rabbi Howard Cohen, of AHA, and I, added our suggestions and our pieces along the way. Rabbi Guttman recruited 20 Protestant ministers, some black, some white, and a few spouses, from large churches in Greensboro, and sought funding from a number of Greensboro charitable foundations,

to partially subsidize the trip. Nancy Guttman came along and helped us process our experiences and our feelings at a sharing session each evening. Some ministers had been to Israel before - others were first timers. All of us shared in the experience - sometimes the Jews showed the others “our” Israel, and were the information resources for “What does Judaism teach about....”; Sometimes the ministers were locked in discussion among themselves – at the Jordan river, in discussing the nature of baptism and grace, or in the Galilee trying to tease out what Jesus meant when he talked about the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Most of the time we were all of us, together on the bus, and walking the streets of Jerusalem at night, and sharing meals with each other, and shopping (“he is in the gift shop” and becoming new friends, who, we discovered, already share a great deal in common.

Sometimes, it was thrilling to watch the places unfold through the eyes of our Christian friends - Ceasarea, the *Kinneret*/Sea of Galilee, the Mount of Beatitudes where Jesus walked and taught, the Garden Tomb near Damascus Gate, a quiet spot in the middle of a noisy section of Jerusalem, the view from the Mount of Olives, overlooking the oldest Jewish cemetery in the world, and then beyond to the old City and then further on, the new city of *Yerushalayim*, with its high buildings and construction cranes everywhere.

And it was interesting to see their disappointments, too – At the beautiful Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, which was marred by the commercial business section of the city in which it’s located, or the incense-filled Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, with the turf wars between Coptics, and Armenians and Roman Catholics and Russian and Greek Orthodox.

We learned a lot about the challenges that modern Israel faces.

We stood at the Lebanese border in Metulla, and were briefed on the history of Israel’s Lebanon wars, and the Hizbullah rockets.

We toured some sections of the separation barrier/fence/wall in Jerusalem, and heard from Rabbi David Forman, one of the founders of Rabbis for Human Rights, about the struggle to balance defense against terror and suicide bombers, with the Jewish demand for Israel to maintain a strong moral posture and behavior, even in wartime.

We visited my rabbinical school roommate, Rabbi Levi Kelman in his *Kol HaNeshama* synagogou in Jerusalem , and learned about issues of religious pluralism, and church/state challenges in Israel, and the need to reinvigorate the Jewish tradition and Jewish practice and values for the Israeli Jewish (largely secular) population.

We met Rabbi Ron Kronish, who runs an organization which brings Jews and Moslims and Christians together in Israel, in an effort to find the humanity which binds us together, rather than the differences which separate us.

Tom Sawicki, Nancy Guttman’s brother-in-law, is the program director of AIPAC in Israel. He is responsible for welcoming US congressional delegations, and briefs them on the challenges that Israel

faces, and the support that Israel needs from its best ally – the United States. Tom told us that there are three main existential threats that Israel is facing now – Iran, Iran and Iran.

We spoke to a Moslem Palestinian journalist, Khaled Abu Toameh, who shared his bleak view of the Hamas and the Palestinian Authority and the fighting between them, and how the lack of a respected and willing Palestinian partner for Israel makes “peace” only a dream today.

A visit particularly moving to me was with Kobi Meron, a retired colonel, who was the commander of all 73 Israeli Army soldiers who were killed in a helicopter accident in 1997. It was Israel’s worst army accident, and was, in retrospect, a turning point in Israel’s resolve to maintain a buffer zone in Lebanon. Kobi told us about his own feeling of that terrible night, and took us to a beautiful new memorial which is being built at the site of the crash, in northern Israel. Most of the soldiers were not yet twenty years old.

A few more highlights of the trip:

The Kotel - I had suggested that the ministers adopt a Jewish custom of asking members of their congregations to give them *kvitlach* –notes with personal prayers, to put in the stones of the *Kotel*, the Western Wall. So Friday just before Shabbat, we all came to the Kotel plaza, the place was packed with daveners and tourists, and some of us, rabbis and ministers alike, schlepping Ziploc bags filled with *kvitlach*, went up to the kotel and gently and reverently placed those prayers in its cracks.

Yad Vashem - the Museum at *Yad Vashem*, the Shoah/Memorial Campus has been redone in the past three years. It is a powerful accounting of the events of those terrible years for the Jewish People and for the world. Again, some ministers came knowledgeable about the Holocaust history – some less so; for all of us, it was hard to speak after going through the museum. We also saw the Avenues of the righteous gentiles, and the children’s memorial for the 1.5 million children murdered during those *shoah* years.

An Absorption Center in Tzfat – we visited with Ethiopian immigrants, the Falash Mura, who had been airlifted to Israel and were learning Hebrew and supported and taught until they were strong enough to integrate into Israel society. I witnessed the tears of some of our African- American clergy who were moved seeing the efforts that Israel is making to absorb these newcomers.

Masada – the story of Masada is well known. Of interest to our group because of its historical setting the first century, when both Judaism and Christianity were young, we were able to see in Masada not a message of despair and death, but rather of hope and life. There is a *mikve* there, so that husbands and wives could live together, there were children, despite Masada being a community under siege. I told the story of how I came to Masada on Christmas Day in 2006 to be part of Shelly and Frank Weiner’s grandson’s Bar Mitzvah, and how all seven of the “prayer rooms” were booked for four shifts of one-hour each, so that there were twenty-eight separate B’nai Mitzvah celebrated on Masada that morning, and throughout all of them, Israeli F-16’s kept flying over in practice runs; in a site of Jewish defeat two thousand years ago, what a powerful and joyous morning of life and vibrancy that was.

Ir David – The City of David – There are wonderful excavations going on just outside of the Old City walls in Jerusalem, which are uncovering buildings and fortifications from the First Temple period – the oldest sections of Jewish Jerusalem. Many of us who have travelled to Israel as youngsters have walked through Hezekiah's water tunnel, but now, much more has been uncovered. It's an important site for both Christians and Jewish, because it shows a biblical history which is common to both of us – it's particularly important to Jews, because it shows the ancient Jewish connection to Zion, and by extension, to the Land of Israel.

There were some matters that those new to Israel or new to intense contact with Jewish culture didn't quite get:

- Are Jews a religion or a people, or a race, or a nation, or what, exactly?
- How can Jews be steeped in Jewish culture and values, but claim that they are not religious?
- What is that sweet stuff called – Halvah?

After spending 11 intense days, in Israel, and in each other's company, several things are sure:

- Ministers and Rabbis who visit Israel will never read the bible in the same way again.
- Israel is a tiny little embattled country, filled with problems and issues it needs to solve. It is also an amazing modern country, a first world country in a third world neighborhood, bringing prosperity and healthcare, social welfare and education, high tech and advancement to its people, and working hard to create a just and kind society; a Jewish country in the best sense of what a Jewish country can be.
- I love that country, and I am proud to be a citizen of that country.

For eleven days, ministers and rabbis from Greensboro, NC roomed together, broke bread together, laughed and explored, were challenged and moved. The knowledge we gained, not just the knowledge of Israel, but the knowledge of each other, and the respect created among us, will make each of us better human beings, and will make our synagogues and churches in Greensboro, better neighbors. Because of our time together in Israel, our community in Greensboro will be stronger, more caring, and hopefully, focused on not what divides us, but rather on what we share.

Rabbi Havivi

