

AN EDUCATIONAL AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEY  
*The Or Zarua Israel Trip, May 2005*

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Israel is a nation of dramatic contrasts. It is surrounded by dangerous enemies and fraught with internal strife. And yet, it is a beacon for hope and redemption, a country of youth and vitality, a place where Jewish intellect develops ideas for the whole world to follow.

Our pilgrimage began on a late El Al flight crammed with exuberant Birthright students. Throughout our journey, we encountered them, affected as we were, by this amazing land of our heritage.

Daniel Ehrlich, our charismatic guide, steeped us in history, religion and politics. At the start of our journey, he distributed a thick, informative Source Book which was a collection of maps and statistics and historical information as well as poetry, prayers, and excerpts from the Mishnah, the Talmud and the Tanach, all related to specific parts of our itinerary.

Three superb scholars supplemented our understanding and added to our insight. Rabbi Roberto Abib of Sinai Synagogue in Tel Aviv described the Masorti movement in Israel and hosted us in a visit to his Conservative Yeshiva where students from all over the world come to live and study. Professor Daniel R. Schwartz, a brilliant history Professor from Hebrew University, delivered a stirring lecture on the Second Jewish Commonwealth and the destruction of the Second Temple. Dr. Michael Oren presented a vivid description of the Six Day War and signed copies of his book "Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East" for those of us who were fortunate enough to have one at hand.

The pace was intensive. My camera failed but the vivid pictures in my memory will linger forever.

I remember the ancient village of Qasrin where we sat in a dwelling once inhabited by our ancestors. Some of the curious and agile members of our group climbed a narrow ladder to view the sleeping loft above the living room. This partially restored basalt house had been constructed in the mid-fifth century C.E. and continued to be used until the mid-eighth century.

In Zippori, we learned about its long history that was subject to the influence of Roman and Greek cultures and how those cultures universally impacted Judaism. What a surprise to see a head of Dionysius in the beautiful mosaic on the floor of a synagogue!

While the group traversed the Western Wall Tunnels, a few of us separated and went to an exhibit of the Second Temple. A dramatized movie crystallized for me, the events of

70 C.E., the destruction of the Temple, and the frightening annihilation of a Jewish family.

The fight for survival continues. The miracle of Jewish continuity ran like a constant in the plethora of information we received. A military presence everywhere demonstrated Israel's precarious position in a hostile world environment. An armed guard assigned to our bus heightened this unsettling reality. Nevertheless, wherever we went, there was a pervasive life affirming ambience.

On Yom Yerushalaim, helicopters hovered over the Old City, safeguarding the celebrations below. On that day, we joined Rabbi and Naomi Wechsler in attending their son Ezra's Ordination ceremony, a poignant moment among many for the congenial travelers.

There had been intermittent tears of joy and sadness and pride.

At Independence Hall, we heard the passionate voice of David Ben Gurion, recorded in 1948, declaring Israel's independence. The young soldiers who sat opposite us in the auditorium did not go unnoticed.

The visits to ancient sites where our forefathers lived and worshipped were a testament to the hardships and sacrifices of a life so different from our own. However, out of that dim past, a religion sprang that we still practice today. Those enduring divine truths which ignite our own spirit and inspired our ancestors, as well, shall probably survive through eternity.

On Shabbat, our group divided and attended different Synagogues. At the Reform Synagogue many of us visited, the ritual was a bit New Age in style. There was a celebration of the Sabbath, a feeling of warmth and joy. The Rabbi's sermon compared the extreme diversity in the practice of Judaism to the polarized political climate in Israel. I began to muse that a pattern of political intransigence exists in the United States also. Perhaps, a balanced state of openness and compromise is not indigenous to our time because contemporary issues are much too complex and uncertain.

On one free evening, I visited an orthodox friend who lives in Jerusalem. We had not seen one another for a very long time and there was much to discuss about our personal lives. I was also curious to know how she regarded the impending disengagement in Gaza. Her usual kind expression twisted into bitterness. She said, "Good people will be displaced from their homes. For what? We will get nothing in return." It is apparent that the orthodox community was adamantly opposed to the move. The other Israelis whom I questioned had many different opinions. Those who understand Arabic had witnessed, too often, the duplicity of Arafat. After his demise, there remains considerable distrust of the Palestinians. I was told that in Jerusalem, on a daily basis, there had been recurrent incidents of violence or potential destructive acts that had been thwarted by alert Israeli intelligence. Despite all of this, many believe if there is slim chance for the Palestinians to be placated and Israel to be protected, the Gaza withdrawal is pragmatic and hopeful.

There are many complicated matters that will require resolution but this first step is considered to be symbolic of good faith and cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis. The mutual trust is tenuous but there seems to be no other alternative.

The Golan Heights, however, is not negotiable. Our guide explained this to us as we were walking through the Tel Dan Reserve, pristine in its natural beauty with waterfalls and lakes and dense foliage including the archeological remains of the biblical city of Dan.

The Golan Heights was captured from Syria in the Six Day War in 1967. Now there are thirty Jewish settlements there and over 13,000 residents. That Israeli presence, which is sixty kilometers from Damascus, is a constant deterrent to Syrian aggression. Besides having Biblical significance, the Golan Heights controls thirty percent of Israel's water supply with Lake Kinneret located in that region. In time, we shared individual experiences with descriptions of Services so diverse from each other and often so different from the customs at Or Zarua.

I listened with respect and interest to the earnest young Kabbalist artist, Avraham Loewenthal whose lecture on mysticism and sephirot was bewildering and sometimes convincing. I tried to penetrate his thought and comprehend his absolute faith in the power of love as an ultimate antidote to the problem of evil. His faith was unswerving. His Judaism was deep and complicated. I understood that his premise was subjective but he is a fine artist and many of us purchased examples of his work, all of which have a mystical connotation.

A visit to the legendary cemetery in Tzfat followed. There, the tombs of ancient Rabbis and Kabbalat Masters lay crowded tier upon tier of uniform unadorned stone. Memorial candles burned at some of them. Men in orthodox garb and women, their heads covered with scarves, dotted the scene, everyone immersed in prayer. It was a spectacle that was Holy but somehow, to me, seemed surreal. In my lively imagination, I could envision the Sages meeting among the tombstones, in the dark of night, conducting a Sanhedrin to right the wrongs of this troubled world.

That evening, our group dined in a restored structure from antiquity. We were hosted by a resident chef and feted by charming Klezmer musicians. The spirited music, so full of pathos, beautifully captured the soul of our people and engendered, for me, a truly religious experience.

As we went from place to place, our group was engaged in an abundance of dialogue. The travelers from Or Zarua enjoyed a camaraderie which expressed so well the harmony of spirit of our synagogue. Every person was a trouper. On one occasion, when there was no time to stop for lunch, we shared a repast of fruit and cookies which was consumed on the bus. We had visited the Old City in the morning and now, we were en route to Yad Vashem, Israel's national monument to the Holocaust. At that place, there were no words at all.

We emerged into the light after that experience, subdued and reflective. The Kabbalist's solution to evil in the world had been too simplistic. But what is the solution? How can the brain of a human being, created by G-d generate the atrocities that had been depicted? And why are the Jews, the keepers of the moral law, so universally targeted for destruction? Always an institution like Yad Vashem evokes questions with many answers and then again, no answers at all.

Most rewarding for me was the comfort in being with my fellow congregants. The steadfast kindness that was bestowed on me was unexpected and touching. I had not anticipated the physical demands of the trip nor my own limitations. A reassuring hand was always there to offer help and friendship. Heschel says "We must render kindness to acquire goodness. We must do the good to attain the holy." I thank each one from whom I received spontaneous and genuine chesed. For me, that was a mitzvah to illuminate the world. What a fitting place to have it happen!

On our last day together, we strolled through a literal paradise on earth, a "Garden of Eden," Neot Kedumim. This Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel is halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The terrain abounds in Biblical vegetation with specific landscapes named after their textual sources. We were fascinated by a demonstration of ancient cooking methods and enjoyed tasting the results. It was a delightful culmination of a trip which we all ended with reluctance.