

VIEWS FROM THE BACK OF THE BUS

My wife Louise and I, along with our daughter Sari and our granddaughter Zoe, were together with all of you in Israel. It was a remarkable journey, an incomparable learning experience which, given the number of people involved, along with the challenging logistics, came off remarkably well.

On the personal level, touring is uncommonly demanding and disruptive. Removed from your usual comfort zone, required to forego many accustomed creature comforts, you are, moreover, obliged to conform to unfamiliar daily rhythms and expected to interact continually and cheerfully with others. There are notable physical demands as well – dawn awakenings – long lines at inadequate bathrooms – repeatedly entering and exiting buses – packing and unpacking, etc. Most of you appeared to take that all in stride and in good humor. After all, we were highly motivated, eager to experience as much as possible, to learn all that we could about a land we were predisposed to embrace and support.

I offer the following account in the hope that it can contribute to keeping alive the wonderful adventure we shared. Now that we all have returned to the familiar pathways of daily living, there is the likelihood that our encounter with Israel will fade from view, that we will forget what, at the moment of discovery seemed so vivid, vital and significant. Hopefully a chronicle of this sort can serve to reinforce our recollections, preserve what we observed, heard and experienced well into the future.

I make no claims that this represents an official record or is a comprehensive account. It is based upon what I experienced, reactions that some of you shared with me, chance encounters with Israelis along the way, visits with Israeli friends and reactions to information provided by our exceptional guides. In all likelihood, some of you will share a perspective similar to mine, though others will see things quite differently. It is precisely this interplay and dialogue between contrasting points of view that can illuminate issues as well as encourage us to reflect upon what happened and how we reacted during our days in the land of Israel.

One should not ignore the fact that we were on the ground for just a handful of days, flitted from one location to another while treated to a somewhat sanitized review of affairs in Israel. We were also in some sense cultural voyeurs, attempting to absorb the Israel experience while metaphorically “standing on one foot.” Still, a lengthy journey must begin with the first step. Let us, therefore, move forward.

Would all that we encountered somehow fit together? Might some unifying theme emerge? That would, at first glance, seem unlikely. There were clearly so many disparate elements that one could best describe it as a form of “cultural pointillism.” Could we somehow manage to connect the dots? It is to these “points” that we now turn in the hope that certain linkages emerge. I present these in no particular order. I encourage you to fill in the blanks, and if possible impose a design that meets your own sense of order and meaning.

GUIDING LIGHTS

Of course, you can go on your own, visit the sites, maybe read a guidebook account or two beforehand. But this trip made me realize how much added value guides can bring to the experience. (Guides in Israel must undergo rigorous preparations and meet exacting standards.) We were fortunate indeed to have two exceptional and knowledgeable escorts accompanying us (neither of whom was born in Israel - one in South Africa, the other in the United States). There was Julian, the “father figure,” and Etan a former rabbi, “our buddy.” They pointed out what we should know and understand, providing context, offering historical antecedents and encouraging us not to be passive observers, but to engage with, and reflect upon, what was before us and to assess its significance. We received no academic credits for our trip, but most of us, I believe,

came away much better informed and intellectually well nourished. (And one must add, intact, thanks to our very professional bus drivers who, even when maneuvering through numerous tight spots, kept us out of harm's way.)

A TOUGH NEIGHBORHOOD

Why did God have to choose that strip of territory along the Mediterranean as the "Promised Land"? Was God simply being mischievous? Why is it that so many others showed up? Didn't the Almighty foresee how crowded a neighborhood it would be, that it would serve as a crossroads of the Middle East, and become a hotly contested region. Any surprise then that we encountered all that *tsouris*? The Assyrians, Babylonians, the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Ottoman Turks all came by, some staying on for centuries. Plus, the crusaders had to butt in as well, rampaging clear across Europe to "liberate" the Holy Land from the unholy Saracens. It leaves your head spinning. Contrast this with the U.S. No one ever invaded (though the British did burn Washington, D.C. in the War of 1812, and Pancho Villa, the Mexican "bandit," staged some cross-border raids on the United States early in the 20th Century).

By the way, let's not forget Great Britain, long our closest ally, is the "heavy" in this drama during the period of the British Mandate (1917-1948), even though the Balfour Declaration (1917) promised support for a Jewish State in Palestine. Nonetheless, England consistently attempted to restrict Jewish entry. This policy assumed tragic dimensions in the 1930's and beyond when our people attempted escape to Palestine from Nazi Germany and elsewhere. Louise and I, while walking along the boardwalk in Tel Aviv, came upon a park where a permanent exhibit documented the many ships that tried to "run the blockade" in the 1930's and thereafter, including the "Exodus." Some succeeded, including several that discharged their "human cargo" along the Tel Aviv shore, but quite a few were apprehended by the British and the passengers returned to Europe. By the end of the mandate, the British and the Jews were battling each other, the deadliest attack being the bombing, by Jewish "extremists," of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem (where British administrative officers were located) in which over 90 were killed.

Now what are the odds that all three of the major Western religions would "collide" in that same limited, confined place? A cosmic joke, no doubt. Has that created problems? It sure has. But also evidence of tolerance and a live-and-let-live arrangement. Israel, we were told, has been especially careful in respecting and protecting Christian and Moslem religious sites. That concern apparently has not always been reciprocated.

Israel, as we well know, still resides in a crowded and dangerous neighborhood, a situation altogether foreign to Americans (anyone afraid of the Canadians, though for a long time we worried about Cuba). Sarah Palin did claim foreign policy expertise based upon her ability to see Russia from her Alaskan vantage point, but all of us, when we were up North, did in fact see Lebanon and Syria right there, even Damascus. Of course, Jordan and Egypt are also in the neighborhood (while ISIS has grown deadly in the Sinai) while beyond, an Arab phalanx beckons - no friends of Israel here. With neighbors like these, is it any wonder Israel feels embattled? If that wasn't bad enough, consider the fact that Israel has few supporters across the world. Endless U.N. resolutions testify to that fact, as does the ongoing BDS movement. Incidentally, just as we left, Israel announced that a well-funded (government and private monies) effort would get underway to counter this BDS movement with a carefully targeted information campaign. Anti-Semitism, anti-Israel - often they're one and the same.

NO SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Often along our many travel routes, we were directed to an area adjacent to the highway and informed that it was situated in the “West Bank.” It seemed to be such a crazy quilt patchwork . How, one wonders, could authorities possibly create a geographically unified area, separate and distinct from Israel that could become the basis of a viable independent Palestinian state? As we were reminded again and again, slogans are one thing, but there are, alas, so many details to consider and work out for each situation. It’s unimaginably complicated.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

In most every nation we find a jumble of the old and the new, remnants of what once was together with what has just recently emerged, of old paths and new thoroughfares, of ancient crafts and new technologies, of time-honored ways and recent cultural shifts. In Israel that is taken to extremes. In Jerusalem we find a modern city but in its bosom a walled enclave originally built back at the dawn of civilization. In Safed we are transported back in time while in Tell Aviv we gawk at shining new residential towers penetrating skyward. We view the traditional market stalls in many a location and pass by the high end boutiques on our way to the Tower of David or on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv. We stroll cobbled streets and whisk along well-paved super highways. We ascend in elevators and also peer down into bottomless excavations that expose ancient civilizations. We encounter Israelis dressed most fashionably alongside the Orthodox, garbed in a manner unchanged for ages. We examine traditional craft products and are informed that Israel’s hi-tech sector is world class. We ponder the precariousness of life when passing through dessert terrain and observe austere Bedouin encampments, but also delight in bountiful Israeli breakfasts and hear tell of wondrous new solar power possibilities. Sometimes the old and the new clash, with demands that people make choices, take sides. On other occasions they become part of a rich tapestry that gives depth and adds dimension and meaning to our lives.

KEEP ON DIGGING

Dig underground in the United States and you’re not likely to find much of historical significance; maybe some Indian arrowheads, a burial ground or two, prehistoric animal skeletons, but not much more. Dig down deep in Israel and there’s no telling what you will uncover. Here, archeology is a national passion. The search is on, not for gold or precious metals, but for evidence of ancient artifacts, documents, structures from any number of cultures and civilizations that took root in the land countless centuries ago. The point was illustrated most vividly in the vicinity of The Wall, where we could peer down into the depths into an area where continued excavation was underway. History, once assumed to be lost, is being rediscovered and reinterpreted piece by piece. It’s a slow, painstaking process, but the rewards can be spectacular. Yesterday’s rubble has the potential of revealing secrets that are of great consequence today.

SCENIC DELIGHTS

If asked beforehand to describe the topography of the land of Israel I believe may of us would have focused upon the Judean Hills, the Negev, the Golan Heights, Mt. Hermon, the Dead Sea and the coastal beaches. What surprised and impressed me during our many bus excursions was the diversity of the land. In fact, one of you observed how remarkable it was that so many different landscapes could be found in a country so small. What I saw were rolling hills and formidable mountain ranges, deep valleys and densely forested areas (not many rivers or lakes, however). Most impressive were the orchards and the sizeable areas of cultivated fields efficiently planted with rows of young plants, covered for their protection and to retain moisture. However,

you define a land of “milk and honey,” I discovered Israel to be not at all drab and uninviting, but rather saw nature in all its many splendors.

MASADA

Some facts fall out of favor, replaced by new versions undergirding alternative perspectives. This became apparent when our guides related the story of Masada. We had long viewed this example of Jewish resistance as an undeniably heroic episode in our history. Jews standing up to, defying and holding out bravely against the mighty legions of imperial Rome. Too often our people had been pushed aside, crushed by powerful enemies, able to offer but token resistance. This time it was different. A band of Jews kept the Romans at bay from their redoubt at Masada. And just when the siege was about to succeed, instead of submission and surrender the Jews chose death at their own hands, thereby depriving their adversaries the ultimate satisfaction of conquest.

All this, in fact, happened: the basic facts have not been challenged. And for years proud Israelis and Jews everywhere celebrated Masada as a prime example of Jewish grit and a determination “to live free or die.” Nowadays, not so much, we were told by our guides. The Jewish group fleeing to and holding out atop Masada (one of the luxurious residences of Herod) was described to us as a band of religious zealots, irreconcilables. They opposed any negotiations, any concessions. They were a group separate and apart and at odds with the larger Jewish community. What about their decision to sacrifice their lives rather than wait to be overrun? The choice was made, we were told, by a small group and imposed on all (women obviously had no voice in the outcome). Men were assigned to kill family members, including children, and then each other. Truly a gruesome undertaking. Heroic? A rallying cry for Jews? Certainly it can be construed this way. But we were led to believe that is not a point of view that goes unchallenged these days. Still, it’s quite a riveting tale, however you spin it. Anyway, the view from the summit – spectacular.

DON'T MESS WITH THE ROMANS

Nonetheless, some Jews had the chutzpah to try. There were actually several uprisings, but the two most prominent were in 66 A.D. and again in 132 A.D. In the first instance, Titus, a future Roman emperor, in a struggle lasting nearly four years, conquered Jerusalem and utterly destroyed the second temple. Recognizing the size and enormous weight of the temple stones as we did, it is a wonder and a measure of Roman unrestrained fury and destructive expertise that they accomplished this feat.

The other Jewish rebellion led by Simon bar Kokhba, after initial successes against Roman soldiers, was crushed once Emperor Hadrian dispatched a very substantial force to the area. In addition to a largescale depopulation of Jewish communities, Rome’s vengefulness assumed the form of a name change designed to erase memory. No longer would the region be known as Judea or Israel, but rather as Palestine. And Palestine it remained until the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. And where are the Romans today?

YAD VASHEM

Visiting Holocaust memorials can be an overwhelming experience, emotionally eviscerating, inducing endless tears and anger barely suppressed. But somehow that did not happen this time. Why, I wondered was this so. Part of the answer had to do with the dense crowds that milled about (in some areas replicating conditions in the concentration camps themselves, where Jews were herded together, uncertain of what would come next. Whenever I wished to stop and examine an “exhibit” or read a lengthy explanation or

description, I felt pressure to move on as others present pressed forth to take my place. As is the case with such memorials, some presentations were too ghastly to take in. And there was simply too much of it, too much to sort out, to absorb. One needed a quiet place to gather one's thoughts. Thankfully we found it in the hall where the names of the three million identified victims were housed. Here the centerpiece was profoundly moving, consisting of a bottomless well or pit, eloquent testimony to the gaping hole and void the Holocaust had produced in the ranks of world Jewry. I believe a visit to the exceptionally moving Children's Memorial would have reclaimed the morning's experience for me, but it had been closed to the public so that Japanese dignitaries could visit undisturbed. I consoled myself with the thought that it was well that the Japanese were present. Their atrocities in China (Rape of Nanking), as well as during World War II, have been obscured by the Nazi's murderous onslaught. Perhaps their visit would remind them that they also have much to atone for.

BATTLE GROUNDS

At one-point Julian offered the view that all Israelis to an extent suffer some form of PTSD. Such a diagnosis is not unreasonable. (A point confirmed in a conversation with a friend of ours. She had been living near Israel's northern border during the "troubles" with Lebanon and became traumatized in response to the daily toll of living dangerously. For one year she remained in a state of shock. Subsequently, she moved further south, has made an effort to divorce herself from the news of the day, and has attempted to create an emotional cocoon around herself. Today, she has become a painter who has become notably successful.) Israel probably has the dubious distinction of being involved in more wars and conflicts than any other country in the years immediately following the nation's creation. (The United States fought an undeclared naval war with France [1798] and later the War of 1812 against Great Britain.) In Israel 1948, 1967, 1973-everyone knows these are war years. Throw in some intifadas, Lebanon conflicts and sporadic terror attacks to round out the grim picture. Add to this the unrelenting pressure of countless missiles in Lebanon and Gaza, all aimed at Israel, prepared to launch at any time.

What has been Israel's response? The creation of armed forces that are world class - well trained, highly motivated, well equipped (guides pointed out several arms depots along our bus routes) and rapidly mobilized. The army is perhaps the most popular institution in the country. Israel has its own defense industry and also relies on American counterparts (e.g., Raytheon) for an assured supply of modern weaponry. Israel possesses sophisticated intelligence services, the Mossad considered to be highly professional and efficient. We must not omit Israel's nuclear capabilities. How many such weapons are in its arsenal? "No comment" is the official response. Israel must, however, continue to win all of its serious military engagements. A major loss could threaten its very existence.

How does this all translate? Many of us were a bit apprehensive when, just days before our departure, Trump announced his intention to begin planning to shift the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Would the Palestinians erupt and create a dangerous condition across the country? Some unrest did follow, but it appeared to be more ritualized than real. On the other hand, one of our buses heading toward Gaza was obliged to turn around when news arrived of the launch of three missiles from Gaza by Hamas (two of which were thwarted by the Iron Dome) and the movement of Israeli tanks into the area.

A shopkeeper in Tel Aviv informed me that the tourist trade had slackened somewhat, a situation he attributed to fears about violence. How cautious were we walking the streets? Did we consider the possibility of "lone wolf" assaults? The few people that I spoke with about the issue said that, while they mostly felt at ease, they stayed alert and avoided areas that were isolated and unoccupied. "Good fences make good neighbors," the poet Robert Frost once opined. In Israel's case they seemed to have kept the peace. We were informed that the walls (and fences) have succeeded in sharply reducing infiltration

activity and the resultant violence. Predictably, Palestinians regard them in a different light, especially when enduring lengthy delays when passing through. On the occasions when a security threat is declared, West Bank workers are unable to reach their jobs. Centuries ago, walls were the rage around towns and castles. Today, they're a relic of nastier times – except that conditions do get nasty with some regularity in Israel. The Great Wall of China, once a defensive fortification, is today a World Heritage site and a major tourist attraction. Hopefully, Israel's walls one day will fall into the same benign category.

MADE IN ISRAEL

If there were any murmurs of discontent during our trip it related to the amount of time allotted for shopping. Tourists, after all, are reputed to be inveterate shoppers. To curtail such activities places tour leaders at considerable risk. Inevitably there's tension between those who want to go shopping and others eager to see the sights. One must move with exceptional caution between these polar opposites.

What is it that activates the shopping gene on trips such as ours? Shopping confirms and validates travel, provides tangible evidence that one has been abroad and recognized the unique products associated with particular locales. How can you visit Russia, for example, and not buy a nesting doll? Or travel to Ireland and avoid purchasing a hand knit sweater? Certain countries, it is assumed, produce products unlikely to be found elsewhere and presumably at a "good" price. So, one would be remiss in not purchasing them. Then, too, unlike in the U.S., bargaining is acceptable, even expected in many foreign countries, so there is also the allure of haggling, of emerging victorious. (A member of our group noted that he'd entered into the bargaining arena only to discover the back and forth involved but a few shekels – hardly a high stakes contest.)

Speed dating has come of age, but "speed shopping" remains untested and probably unwelcome. Shoppers, after all, like to examine the goods, make up and then change their minds, consult with others before taking the plunge. None of this can occur when your group is moving rapidly along a street and through serpentine alleyways. Such fly buys can be very upsetting to shoppers. I noted this when we moved through the succession of market stalls in Old Jerusalem, Accra and Jaffa. To stop and shop or make an instant purchase risks losing contact with the group in motion. One, therefore, would simultaneously both gain and lose. You can, of course, back Israel by planting a tree, or buying a bond, but most of us would prefer to demonstrate our support by shopping in Israeli stores.

Remember – Whatever you buy, be it a religious object, a piece of jewelry, a painting, you will always receive compliments upon showing it to others. No one, after all, would dare criticize or comment critically on your poor taste or pedestrian purchases.

GOODS APLENTY

In America we have our flea markets, outdoor bazaars, giant garage sales and other multi-vendor happenings, but nothing quite like the beehive of commerce we entered when tramping through the winding narrow paths of Jerusalem's Old City or the stores and stalls in Accra, Jaffa or Safed. It is both an exhilarating and dizzying experience, with storekeepers aligned cheek by jowl in a seemingly unending warren where are offered goods of bewildering variety. We hear invitations to enter, pleas to stop and shop, offers of bargains, but we are on the move, unable to stop. I take note of the disappointment on the faces of the merchants once it's apparent that we will not be shopping. I wonder how all of them can make a living, given the multitude of shops, many offering similar goods. I comfort myself with the thought that they've occupied these same stalls year after year, apparently doing well enough to carry on. Or is that just wishful thinking on my part?

THE COST OF LIVING

Israel has a world class airport, a dramatic upgrade from a once humble aerodrome. New construction appears to be the order of the day, a major national highway currently underway, a railroad network being extended, and a light rail project well advanced, plus new residential construction nearly ubiquitous, the “crane” having become, according to Julian, the national bird. When I asked for an explanation he made reference to an emergent affluent class of Israelis, most related to high tech enterprises. These were the folks who were filling these expensive apartments. He was also quick to note a rapidly widening economic gap in Israel, an inequality of income that placed the nation among the worst performing countries in that category among advanced developed nations. Contrast this with the earlier Kibbutz ideal and its commitment to a rough equality. Julian also referred to the decline of Histadrut, the general organization of workers in Israel (founded in 1920 by David Ben-Gurion). No doubt its weakness is related to the widening income gap (after all they didn’t even protest the harvesting of beets by us- non-union “foreign” workers from America!). By the way, did you notice the extraordinary proliferation of beauty parlors on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv? That is not, I imagine, unrelated to the rising affluent class already noted. While on the subject, Louise and I did some browsing about in local supermarkets and discovered that prices of ordinary items were notably higher than in the States. That would seem to underscore how difficult it must be for the average Israeli to get along. (My daughter Sari’s friend, who drives a small car around Tel Aviv, told her it cost \$120 to fill the tank. Were that the case in America, there’d probably be a revolution.) To tourists looking in from the outside much of the demands of daily life, I suspect, goes unnoticed. On the other hand, I did not encounter that many beggars along the way. Does that square with your experiences? I’m not sure what it meant but why not consider it a positive sign?

STAYING IN TOUCH

The cell phone has introduced a new dimension to touring. The trip proceeded as smoothly as it did because our guides were constantly on their phones, communicating with each other, and calling ahead to confirm reservations and adjust schedules. It’s hard to imagine how all of this got done in pre-smart phone days. Additionally, lengthy bus rides were rendered less tedious when young and old alike took to their phones for diversion. Back in the day, to make a call to the States from overseas generally was both complicated and costly. No longer. Just by “dialing” the number my wife was, in an instant talking to our son on the West Coast. When she fell sick she simply text messaged her physician on Long Island and, in no time, he responded. This is all to the good, except that it tethers you to home, allows you to remain comfortable, diminishes the sense of being away, on your own in pursuit of adventure.

And your phone is also taking pictures. For most there was no more lugging around a camera, stocking up or buying film, waiting to get back home to view scenes you’d captured. It was so simple – aim and press. Again and again. No doubt our collective pictures totaled in the thousands. No one, however, was more avid in this pursuit than Michael Cohen, who each day devoted himself to capturing every imaginative place and face, the minutiae and the majestic. He will have much to show for his tireless efforts.

THE PALESTINIANS

This was unquestionably an Israeli-centric tour. I can't recall learning much about the Palestinians. Did I miss something? Was I absent when such discussions occurred? I did hear Julian note that while Jewish towns usually altered the topography to suit their needs, Arab villages on the other hand tended to conform to the configurations and dictates of the landscape. He also commented upon the generally poor level of Palestinian leadership over the years; leadership given to showboating but seemingly indifferent to upgrading the daily lives of their people. He also offered a "corrective" regarding the War for Independence in 1948, related to the exodus of tens of thousands of Palestinian residents. He acknowledged that many left to get out of harm's way, or were driven out by Israeli soldiers. But, he added, many departed once assured by Arab leaders that, in the aftermath of an Israeli defeat, they would be allowed to return to their homes and to take possession of the residences of the Jews who were driven out.

Perhaps others in the group acquired more information about the Palestinian issue. For me there was a notable gap of information and analysis (notwithstanding Julian's reference to the "Walled-Off Astoria Hotel in Bethlehem"). It was, however, somewhat compensated for by the daily presence of our delightful Israeli-Arab bus drivers. They were genuinely sweet and pleasant fellows. Maybe that's all I needed to know. And, by the way, all our Arab cab drivers were uniformly courteous and on every occasion got us to our destinations.

Addendum: There was reference to a Palestinian Diaspora, a clustering of populations in such places as Lebanon, Jordan, Chile, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Honduras, as well as Detroit and Dearborn, Michigan. Also noted: an unexpected factoid regarding the investments in an Arab village just outside of Jerusalem by Moslems in Chechnya.

MEN IN BLACK

Just as with the Palestinians, we had scant contact with, or received much information about, Israel's influential orthodox community. We did encounter Shabbos elevators and experience Sabbath lockdowns in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, but that added little to our understanding of this population. Our first day of touring was early Saturday morning (off to Ein Gedi). The streets were nearly deserted, except for black garbed men moving helter-skelter, heading off to pray. While watching them it became apparent they were going in various directions, probably to different shtiebels. We were told that the Orthodox divide into separate sects and follow particular rabbinical leaders. Experienced observers are able to determine, depending upon their unique headgear and distinctive garments, their particular affiliations.

All of us understood beforehand that the Orthodox community wields immense influence (despite constituting a relatively small percentage of the population). Our guide mentioned that on Saturday they even assume the authority to close off various streets in their communities to outside traffic. In addition, they call the shots regarding marriage, conversions, etc. Their influence is seen most openly when it comes to the Wall, where they enforce strict gender separation. A struggle of long standing relates to creating an egalitarian section at the Wall where men and women may mingle and pray (a campaign spearheaded by Women of the Wall). Concessions on this issue for a time seemed likely but foot dragging by the government and pressure from within Orthodox circles has arrested the process. You may have noticed just before we headed into the main plaza, a small platform erected in a far off corner alongside the Wall where Bar Mitzvah services were underway, attended by both men and women. There is still a long way to go.

Of course, the issue of the settlements on the West Bank and their incorporation into a greater Israel (Judea and Samaria), a highly charged subject (to my knowledge not discussed)), remains a goal high on the agenda of certain Orthodox groups.

We probably knew beforehand that there is a fair amount of resentment in Israel toward the Orthodox community (while we were there the Knesset was wrestling with the issue of enforcing Sabbath closings in towns where, by local ordinance, stores were allowed to stay open). The only insight I gained came from speaking to a friend who has lived in Israel for the past fifty years. She preferred, she observed, not to be around in August, a time when Orthodox families and groups head into her area up north to camp out. She considered them as unwelcome intruders who made a mess of things and left piles of garbage in their wake. Other Israelis, I imagine, are critical of the Orthodox because of their disproportionate influence, the subsidies they receive from the government, their general avoidance of military service, and the fact that their world view and way of life diverges sharply from that of the majority population. How a secularizing society relates to and reckons with an aggressive religiously orthodox population is not readily apparent.

Still and all, the most unforgettable moments of the entire trip for me each occurred, believe it or not, at the airport in Israel and later at JFK. I'm sure many of you saw what I did. Walking by us in a slow stately manner, as we lined up at the gate at Ben Gurion was a procession of Orthodox men in black, flanking a personage who was doubtlessly a prominent rabbi. Ancient looking, bearded, diminutive, there was nevertheless an unmistakable aura of reverence about him. The same scene was repeated at JFK while we gathered around the baggage carousel. Once again, the procession moving slowly, the rabbi enveloped by his followers, headed toward the exit, a police presence alongside. The Rebbe had been to the Promised Land, and was returning to his people.

Addendum: Besides commenting on the Orthodox Community I should mention the two occasions when my wife and I attended religious services, first at a Conservative Synagogue in Jerusalem and later in Tel Aviv at a Progressive Temple where most of you also were present. In the first instance there was just a handful of worshippers and at the second, other than our group, just a few "members" present. Either that speaks to a lack of interest, or perhaps it is on Saturday mornings that the "crowds" gather.

MATTERS OF FAITH

A number of interesting insights emerged as a result of our visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The place is central to the story of Jesus' death and the belief that he was the Son of God. We were informed that the church belonged to and was administered by seven different Christian denominations that mistrusted one another to manage the affairs of the holiest of sites. To resolve the impasse, authority over the church was handed over to Moslem officials or clerics in the belief that they would act impartially. Presumably, this arrangement has proved satisfactory.

Julian made certain that we understood the significance of two wall illustrations. One depicted the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham at the request of the Almighty, an action forestalled at the last minute by the appearance of a ram, which was sacrificed instead. The other illustrates Jesus, having just died upon the cross, lying upon the ground. The implied message, we were informed, was that Isaac had not died but Jesus in fact had been sacrificed; it is, therefore, through Jesus, the son of God, that the almighty wishes to convey his truths to the world.

Finally, we learned that consistent with the fact that Jesus was a Jew all his life, customary funeral rituals were followed; namely that his body first was washed, then placed in a cave in accordance with Jewish practice in which, once a year had passed, required that it be removed and buried (underscoring the latter day Jewish practice known as the unveiling). Had we wandered through the church on our own, we would have missed these illuminating explanations from our guides.

TCHOTCHKES

Every nation produces an endless supply of cheap tchotchkes, ready to sell to visitors. Souvenir stores are everywhere where tourists are likely to congregate. Israel is no exception. After all, when we go overseas we feel obligated to return with some small tokens of our travels. There are, after all, friends, family members, grandchildren who presumably are eager to acquire “unique” items emblematic of a particular country. Magnets always seem to be available featuring easily identifiable symbols of the place. In this instance, cute stuffed camels were widely available, as were the tee shirts (“Don’t Worry America – Israel has your Back;” “Israel Defense Forces”.) In Israel, religious themed items were everywhere – kiddush cups, dreidels, yarmulkas, menorahs, tallit, rabbinical figurines, the Wall, Hand of God. They were inexpensive, some even tasteful, and they packed easily. I imagine very few of us headed home without purchasing some of these ready “reminders” of our trip.

THE GOOD SHEPHERDS

Like shepherds of old Rabbi Jodie and Rabbi Lee kept tabs on their flock throughout the entire trip. And what a remarkable job they did. No one was left behind or abandoned; no one was lost. Do rabbinical training programs include this sort of instruction? During religious services, after all congregants sit quietly in their seats, are attentive and do not wander off. Touring, however, is another matter. Both rabbis took their responsibilities most seriously, attentive to our needs, responsive to our requests. They kept us informed and provided up-to-date bulletins relating to schedule changes. They respected our need for frequent bathroom breaks and made certain we all had an opportunity to use the facilities before moving on. They were gentle but firm when laggards failed to keep pace with the main body of strollers. They kept those intent upon shopping during our many wanderings from disappearing from sight. And we were counted repeatedly, more often than a miser his money. Rabbi Lee, with an exactitude and seriousness worthy of a jail warden, counted and recounted his passengers and insisted that family units keep tabs on one another. It was surely a great source of comfort to all of us knowing that two rabbis were looking out for us, concerned with our physical wellbeing. I can imagine their enormous sense of relief watching us all board the plane and depart Israel. And we now better understand and appreciate how their pastoral responsibilities expanded and how well and gracefully they entered into their new roles. Many thanks.

SHALOM

During the last dinner, Etan in his remarks urged us to consider how our journey, just concluding, will affect our ongoing relationship with Israel. What have we learned about our heritage? While all of us have multiple identities, to what degree will the Jewish component be strengthened by our relatively brief stay, and by our understanding and possible re-examination of the Jewish mission there, made all the more urgent in view of the rekindling of anti-Semitism around the world and in our own country. While we all return to resume our “real” lives, what of the residue of our time in Israel? How will we choose to discuss it with others? Hopefully, this account of our visit, though a partial and obviously personal survey, will assist in recovering memory, help provide a partial foundation for finding meaning in the fact that we are a people with an ancient heritage, finally gathered in a land of our own with a God-given purpose that has endured to this day.

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