

COMMUNITIES

In the starlight, Galilee has no boundaries but the broad compass of the heavens, and is a theatre meet for great events; meet for the birth of a religion able to save a world, and meet for the stately Figure appointed to stand upon its stage and proclaim its high decrees.

I can not help myself but quote Mark Twain from his book *The Innocents Abroad* (chapter 48). Oh my, how profound is this statement.

Forty-eight pilgrims traversed the Holy Land for 18 days this past spring. We met initially in Abu Ghosh at the Convent of the Sisters of Joseph of the Apparition (or Shrine of Our Lady Ark of the Covenant) on top of the Holy Mountain. Ten countries were represented by the pilgrims of whom most had not met before. It was curious to watch, at the first evening meal at the convent, we tentatively hugged and offered our names and origins. At the end of our journey, none of us were strangers. We hugged with enthusiasm and sadness in our goodbyes with high hopes of meeting again. Many emailed weeks later that, during night school, we were still singing together in churches so we were still in each other's company. Our group sang in most of the churches that we visited and sometimes did eurythmy; the acoustics in some were awesome, our voices resounding for several seconds.



Three of the pilgrims celebrated birthdays during the pilgrimage, two in Galilee and one in Abu Ghosh. Happily we sang Happy Birthday in English, a few in German. Several proclaimed the Lord's Prayer in their native tongue, a lovely and loving experience. We shared in the quietude of the convent, in the joy of sites we read about as children, in the awesome presence of the Sea of Galilee (while floating in the pilgrim boat), and in the unfamiliar culture that is of Israel and of Jerusalem. We laughed while bobbing in the Dead Sea, and in the lateness of the evening, so tired from another day's adventure, we could not contain our euphoria and giggled ourselves to sleep. Then next morning at 4:15, we awoke to Call to Prayer blaring out over Abu Ghosh. Nain found us searching in a freshly plowed field for bits of ancient pottery, so excited at our tiny finds.



We shared our meals together every day. The fare was typical of the Mediterranean, fresh and not too spicy. For lunch, the offering was usually pita with stuffings, the best hummus, falafel and fish or chicken and fresh dates and Turkish coffee for dessert. In Old Jerusalem, we partook of a superb mint lemonade. Almost everywhere we had the choice of many fresh fruit juices made there on the spot by the vendor, pomegranate sweet and red. Our servers did not always understand us but we managed to communicate well enough.



In an intimate gathering our last day at the convent, each of us spoke of a unique 'take away.' Some expressed a unique feeling that to come to Jerusalem was to come home. Some spoke of community and I felt 'yes.' The convent community treated the pilgrims with such kindness. The sweetest women originally from the Philippines served us with grace and love. Meals were offered with a genuine smile in the dining room; our last evening meal was a feast of roasted turkey with all the fixings and by candlelight. The gift shop offered so many wonderful souvenirs; piles of scarves were rummaged through till just the perfect one was found as a gift to take home. Our group gave a concert at the convent church our final morning, the convent community and the Singerman family honored us with their heartfelt presence. Because our group was rather large, some of us stayed at Jerusalem Hills Inn in Abu Ghosh while the rest lodged at the convent.



The Singerman family owns and operates the bed and breakfast. Chaim, Ruti, and their six children invited us as family to enjoy their home while we stayed there. The family joined us at the convent for our very first evening meal in Israel. Because it was Friday night, they celebrated Shabbat Shalom with us. Chaim read from and explained readings from the bible with blessings and prayers. The family sang for us, we attempted to join in as they sang the Israeli national anthem. Chaim explained to us that the family is together every Friday night to celebrate and stay up late playing games. This was my first exposure to Messianic Jews, I deeply respect them.

Many Jewish families lodged at a kibbutz hotel by the Sea of Galilee during their week of celebration, we pilgrims were also staying there. We visited Ancient Qasrin in the Golan Heights. The ancient synagogue there was inundated with families dancing, singing and clapping to the music of Shlomo Carlebach who was known as "The Singing Rabbi." A few pilgrims joined right in, such a festive and pleasantly unplanned few minutes.



The 18 days in the Holy Land included sharing Israel with Jews celebrating the week of Passover and Eastern Orthodox Christians observing Easter. The passionate observance of the holy holidays by the mass of humanity impressed upon me how we can share our love of God while living in peace and joy. While visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, we thronged elbow to elbow with Christians from the East and the West as well as Coptic Christians from Egypt; such experiences to process.





In my journal I wrote of the many, many gritudes to each of the pilgrims, for their shared stories and touching me daily in some very special way. A huge thank you to Robert, Karen and Estelle for leadership, guidance and teachings, to Sarnia for coordinating this ‘trip of a lifetime,’ and to Neil and Zachariah for daily transporting and educating the pilgrims in history and culture with maps and readings and discussions as we traveled.

It seems curious enough to us to be standing on ground that was once actually pressed by the feet of the Saviour. The situation is suggestive of a reality and a tangibility that seem at variance with the vagueness and mystery and ghostliness that one naturally attaches to the character of a god. I can not comprehend yet that I am sitting where a god has stood, and looking upon the brook and the mountains which that god looked upon, and am surrounded by dusky men and women whose ancestors saw him, and even talked with him, face to face, and carelessly, just as they would have done with any other stranger. I can comprehend this, the gods of my understanding have been always hidden in clouds and very far away. “The Innocents Abroad” (chapter 45)

I also can comprehend how vague the spiritual world seemed to me too, grand words written on a page by a prophet or an apostle or a contemporary minister. Yes, Mr. Twain, very curious.

