

RABBI'S MESSAGE

AM YISRAEL CHAI – THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL LIVE!

Yes, my recent trip to Israel was during a time of excitement. It seems there is always excitement in Israel. It's a mixed bag, of course. The Jewish homeland, since her birth in 1948, has always had conflict. Just like human life experiences ups and downs, health and illness, accomplishments and loss, Israel has experienced all that and more in her first 70 years as a state, and truly throughout her entire existence. Here are some first-hand highlights:

May 8: On a trip to the Golan Heights, along the Syrian border, our bus stopped at an overlook where we could see the parts of Israel that used to be part of Syria. We observed the strategic areas that made it dangerous for Israeli citizens when it was part of Syria's control. As we departed from the bus, a soldier advised our guide that conflict was likely that day, and we should not spend a lot of time on the overlook. There was indeed rocket fire from Syria that night, and retaliation from Israel that we could hear from our hotel. No injuries were reported.

May 11-12 - Shabbat in Jerusalem: Overlooking the Old City, I was able to lead a *Kabbalat Shabbat* with 85 members of our group that felt as spiritual as when *Kabbalat Shabbat* was initiated in T'fat, centuries ago. On Shabbat morning, I led a worship/learning service, and after Shabbat, Loren and I went to the Western Wall for a peaceful moment.

May 13: *Yom Yerushalayim* in Jerusalem, commemorating the day in 1967 when the Western Wall was liberated. Between 1948 and 1967, Jerusalem was not under Israel's control, and Jews were denied access the Wall. When I visited on *Yom Yerushalayim*, unlike the night before, it was wall-to-wall people, almost everyone on the men's side was wearing *t'fillin*, enthusiastic in their morning prayers. Though it seemed it might be impossible to actually approach the Wall with all those people, I weaved my way through. I had a mission: I took great joy in being able to personally deposit into the crevices notes that TBT members and Religious School students had entrusted me to deliver.

We also had the opportunity to study at Pardes Institute, which is led by Rabbi Leon Morris. Rabbi Morris is a life-long friend who had been a camper of mine at a Jewish summer camp in West Virginia when he was 12 years old and I was 20. He is now president of one of the most respected pluralistic institutions of Jewish learning in the world. With rabbis and other students, we studied Torah and Talmudic passages about the importance of saving lives and protecting your own.

Sunday concluded with a powerful visit to *Yad Vashem*, Israel's Holocaust Museum. Words cannot relate the impact of this memorial.

May 14: On the secular anniversary of Israel's Independence Day (Israel observes its independence on the Hebrew calendar, 4 Iyar), the U.S. Embassy officially opened in Jerusalem. Israelis were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about this event, as many also said, "We appreciate the U.S. recognizing what we have known for more than 3,000 years!"

May 15: This day was devoted to the "March of the Nations." This program, called "March of Life" in Europe and "March of Remembrance" in Houston, takes place throughout over 350 cities in Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Central and Southern America. It was founded in 2007 by a German pastor, Jobst Bittner, whose own parents were members of the Nazi party, and whose church is filled with those who had ancestors who also had Nazi connections during World War II. The March of Life was developed to promote positive relationships between Jews and Christians, with participants devoted to preventing the wrongs of their parents and grandparents ever happening again.

In the morning, I was invited to speak to over 2,000, mostly Christian participants, to bless the March. In the 1960's, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with Martin Luther King and said, "I was praying with my feet." These participants felt the same way, and enthusiastically embraced my comments. I was one of two rabbis who addressed the group; the other was Yehudah Glick, who is also a member of Knesset.

At noon, I was invited to the Knesset as part of a small delegation from several different countries. We were greeted by six different members of Knesset from four different parties, some from the majority coalition and some from the opposition parties. They all expressed appreciation for the support other nations are giving Israel, with special thanks to Pastor Bittner.

Later that afternoon, Loren and I were part of a March that included nearly 6,000 participants from almost 50 different countries who marched down the streets of Jerusalem pledging their support for Israel. The marchers waved flags from their own countries, waving to residents and onlookers, singing and expressing their love for Israel and the Jewish people. Israeli residents waved back and cheered from the streets and windows; one woman came out on her balcony and sounded a *shofar*, which drew cheers from the marchers.

May 18-19, Shabbat: A personal treat – Shabbat dinner with a cousin who recently made *Aliyah* (moved to Israel) to be close to her two sons, daughter-in-law and grandson. The synagogue we attended in the morning included many English speaking immigrants from South Africa, and I actually saw a couple I knew from Houston!

May 19-20, Shavuot: This was the first time I had the chance to observe a major Jewish holiday in Israel. The tradition on *Shavuot* is to study late into the night so we are awake at the time when tradition teaches that we received the Ten Commandments from Sinai. With thousands of others, Loren and I marched to the Western Wall at 4:00 A.M. While there are separate sections for men and women to pray, there is also a section called the Robinson Arch, not as visible, where men and women can pray together. Walking to the Wall, we joined thousands of Jews from all over the world. As we watched the sun rise over Jerusalem, we remembered the covenant that our people embraced thousands of years ago. Observing Shavuot in this way, we felt the covenant being refreshed.

Later in the day, we were treated to lunch at the home of Rabbi Leon Morris, with his family and a family of Jews from Bombay, India, who Rabbi Morris knew when he was working with the World Jewish Congress. Learning about Jewish life in India was an added bonus of the day.

With all these experiences, I've been asked, "What was most remarkable?" That answer is easy: it's the PEOPLE! The sights are powerful; the people are special. We met strangers on the streets who engaged us in the benefits of the growing Reform and Conservative movements of Judaism in Israel. We spoke with cab drivers who related such love for their homeland. An Arab/Bedouin shopkeeper told us about his people and his friendships with Israeli Jews. An artist who is still operating the same gallery he was in when I first met him 25 years ago told about relationships he's developed with tourists over the years. We saw immigrants, students, soldiers and ex-soldiers, tourists, visitors, young and old. Personal stories can only be experienced personally. Regardless of any conflicts that exist, when we engage people personally, the human heart shines through. My recent trip to Israel reinforced for me the wonderful diversity of the Jewish people as well as all humankind, and the valuable insights we get with personal connections.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon