

ISRAEL 2015

Oct. 10. Everyone departs from their respective airports and arrive at JFK around 6pm in preparation for our 11:30pm flight on El Al to Tel Aviv, a 10 hour flight. Amidst hugs and hellos, we begin to meet up and make introductions. Several of us go to the King David lounge and relax in luxury. Soon it's time to board our jumbo 747 aircraft. First class was amazing from the pajamas and toiletries to the food and service. Our seats became lie flat beds complete with mattresses.

Oct. 11: we land in Tel Aviv on Sunday evening 5:30pm. We are excited to be here. El Al did a fantastic job providing wheelchair assistance for 6 of us and taking us through customs and to retrieve our luggage. We are met at the airport by Nir Maor, President of Yael Adventures and Revital, our tour guide for the next 10 days, as well as our accessible motor coach and bus driver, Judah. Mobility scooters for four of us are already loaded on the bus. This trip is really about to become a reality and we all get settled on the coach and begin our almost two hour drive to Tiberias and the Leonardo Hotel, our home for the next three nights. Tired and hungry, we arrive to find a buffet dinner waiting for us. We also meet three more of our group, Isaac, Sylvia and Jacob Abraham, who arrived earlier from Toronto. After dinner we were all happy to head to our accessible rooms for a good nights sleep in preparation for our first day of touring.

Oct. 12: we are heading out on our first full day of touring in Israel. I have my usual anxiety; will the group blend well, will the sites be accessible, etc.? We eat breakfast and are all aboard the motor coach by a little after 9am. We are in Tiberias and are headed to Haifa to see the Baha'i Gardens from the top of Mt. Carmel. We then visited Mukhraka where Elijah faced off against the prophets of Ba'al. Bought some beaded necklaces from a Druze for Leah and Molly. We saw Mt. Tabor, site of the Church of the Transfiguration. We then went on to Nazareth and the Church of the Annunciation. The streets are hilly, narrow and crowded with vendors but we manage to get to the church in a single file line. Much to our dismay, we do not see an accessible entrance to the ground floor of the church. We do manage to get Nate's power chair up the two steps with the help of some total strangers. There was an ancient mikvah below the church. We then continued up the hill and found the entrance to the main part of the church to be accessible. There was a mass taking place inside. We returned to our hotel for a second night in Tiberias. Winona was having problems with her scooter so the company brought scooters by at 11pm for her to try.

Oct 13: Tuesday and unseasonably hot. We will be exploring the region of the Sea of Galilee today. Our first stop is Capernaum also known as Jesus Town. We visited the Church of Multiplication in Tabgha and the Mount of Beatitudes. The Christians in the group were very moved and brought to tears. We were supposed to take a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee but found out that the entrance to the boat was not accessible. Needing a replacement activity, we went to an olive oil factory and had a great falafel lunch in the Golan Heights close to the Syrian border. Everyone really enjoyed learning about the olive oil and tasting the samples. We also washed our hands with soap made from olive oil. Made them very soft. Now it was on to the River Jordan and the baptismal site. LuAnn and Sue changed into the white robes and went into the river. The Abrahams filled a basin from the river and submerged Jacob's feet and then Nate put his hands into the water. It was a very moving experience for all. They all got baptismal certificates and Revital wrote their names in Hebrew. It was a great day and enjoyed by all. Last night at the Leonardo Hotel in Tiberias and then we head to the Dead Sea in the morning.

Oct. 14: Wednesday and all packed up on the coach. Heading south from Tiberias to Beit She'an and Cesarea. Beit She'an is an Israeli National Park and is quite beautiful. It is the site of archaeological excavations with an amphitheater still in use today for concerts. Wonderful accessible paths have been put in recently so we could get around pretty well. The only downside

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was the heat. We then traveled on to Cesarea National Park with a stop at a shopping center for lunch. Had a huge Quinoa salad which was way too big to finish but very good. Cesarea is so beautiful on the shores of the Mediterranean. Filled with ancient artifacts and excavation sites, access was fairly good but some areas still need work. It was a little difficult for the scooters, Nate had to transfer into his manual chair to get over the rocks and Raul never made it. All agreed it was worth it to see and feel the sea. We finished off our visit with yummy home maid ice cream. We arrive at the Rimolim Royal hotel at the Dead Sea at 8pm and go straight to dinner. Large, crowded hotel filled with many rude people. They just barge in front of our wheelchairs and scooters. Dinner is same Israeli buffet. Navigating elevators was pretty rough. The accessible rooms were very weird...the shower seat was attached to the wall outside the bathtub. I would not use this hotel again.

October 15: Thursday. Woke up to the Dead Sea out our window and another extremely hot day. Today we would visit Masada. I was pretty excited to be here after knowing so many stories of what had taken place here. Our group had its own cable car to ascend the mountain. I was pleasantly surprised at the accessibility and we all did very well. I think the national bird of Israel is the fly. They are everywhere and really aggravating. It was very fascinating being here. We had lunch in the visitor center and then went back to the hotel. Changed into bathing suits and went across the street to the Dead Sea. It was so hot. Lynda, Sue and Lorraine got in the water. Isaac helped Winona and I waited an hour for a wheelchair but I got in with help from Rivital, Isaac and a big lifeguard. Stayed in for a while and the lifeguard picked me up and put me in the chair. Best part was the fresh water shower. Now I can say I have been in the Dead Sea. Lorraine and I scooted back to the hotel and went in the salt water pool in the spa. Showered and then had a great 70 minute Swedish massage. An excellent day.

October 16: Friday. Started out the day by going to Qumran National Park where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the caves. It is also the home of the Essenes. Truly fascinating place. More great accessibility. The national parks have done an awesome job. Then we went to Ahava famous for cosmetics and skin products from the Dead Sea. Had a quick lunch and then we were on our way to Tel Aviv. We passed thru Jerusalem and now I felt I was in Israel. Lots of violence and problems right now so hope we can actually visit Jerusalem. We are staying at the beautiful David Intercontinental Hotel across from the Mediterranean and the promenade. We enjoyed a very special Shabbat dinner with our group. Steve did the blessings over the bread and wine and everyone had a great time.

October 17: Saturday. Shabbat in Tel Aviv. We began our day at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. Bought some items in the gift shop; notecards, metal box and dish from artist Klimpt from Woman in Gold and a journal. Then on to a Sarona, a German cultural complex. Had lunch with Annette, Nate, Wendy and Paul. Back to hotel and sat by pool with Lorraine and LuAnn. Another fun group dinner tonight. No buffet.

October 18: Sunday. Said goodbye to beautiful Tel Aviv and went to plant trees in a beautiful location on the way to Jerusalem. They had prepared tree planting holes for us as close to the road as possible for us. Lorraine requested the tree planting but everyone wanted to participate and joined in. I planted a tree for my mom and dad, Steve planted one for his parents, Lorraine for her husband and Winona for her daughter. Isaac and Sylvia planted seven trees. Each person had their own reason and it was very touching and meaningful for all.

On to lunch at a Very good little restaurant. Now it was time to visit Yvel jewelry and hear their touching story. The owners hire and train new immigrants to Israel in the art of jewelry making. They help a lot of Ethiopian Jews learn skills so they can find work. It was a very touching story. The showroom had magnificent but very expensive jewelry. Most of us found items to buy including

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me. I got gray pearl earrings, a bracelet and a gorgeous pair of white freshwater pearl flower earrings.

We now entered the city of Jerusalem taking the road around the walled city. Visited the Garden of Gethsamene and the Church of Agony. Afterwards went to Ramat Rachel Kibbutz Hotel where we will spend our last three nights in Israel. Hotel is nice but not fancy. Roll in shower has no shower curtain!

October 19: Monday. Morning started with trip to Bethlehem where no Israelis are allowed and no Jews live. Personally, it was quite uncomfortable and I was happy when it was over. The group loved visiting the Church of the Nativity where Jesus was born. We had a Christian Palestinian guide who was very nice and helpful. Afterwards, we spent some time at a Christian store so the group could shop. Drove back to the hotel and Revital rejoined us. Went to the old city of Jerusalem and the Jewish Quarter. So happy to be here. Went to a bagel place for lunch and enjoyed egg salad on a yummy bagel. Then we did some souvenir shopping for Molly, Samuel, Leah and Noah. Came back to the hotel and will go out for a restaurant meal tonight. Went out for a fantastic dinner high in the mountains above Jerusalem. It was really delicious. All kinds of salads and appetizers, main course and dessert. Every day is fantastic.

October 20: Tuesday. We had a very full day today beginning at the Western Wall where all prayed at the Wall. So glad to be back after 18 years. Left a note in the wall. From there we went to Yad Vashem which has been totally redone since my first visit. We had an excellent guide leading us thru and it was very emotional for me. After a quick lunch and time to buy the beautiful hand crocheted scarfs, we went to Bible Land Museum. I was really tired even though we had another very knowledgeable guide. From there we went outside to the Israel Museum which had an incredible model of the ancient city of Jerusalem. This is where the Dead Sea Scrolls are housed so on our travels we saw the caves where they were found. Back to the hotel for dinner. Our group has truly bonded and traveled very well together. This is our last night in Jerusalem. There is a lot of violence going on in the city and we had our event canceled for tonight at the Tower of David. There was violence outside the Gates of Bethlehem where we were just yesterday.

October 21: Wednesday. Our last day in Israel. We are now talking about all the violence that has taken place in Jerusalem during our stay but we saw none of it and Yael kept us safe, altering our schedule when necessary in order to keep us out of harm's way. Today we left Ramat Rachel and drove to Hadassah Hospital but could not get parking so we were not able to see the Chagall windows. Then we headed back to Tel Aviv where we visited Tel Aviv University and the Museum of the Diaspora. I would have really enjoyed this except for the very unruly school group that was there. We had lunch there and then we were going to the location where independence was declared for Israel. Traffic was terrible and parking was difficult so decision was made to go directly to Azreili Mall so group could have one more shopping opportunity. It was a large mall with many of the same stores as in U.S. I bought some jewelry at an Israeli shop and got Scott a Jerusalem shirt at North Face. Steve and I took the wrong elevator and got lost. Very scary. An Israeli woman helped us and called Yael who called Revital. Very embarrassing. We had a farewell dinner in Jaffa at an open air Israeli restaurant where Dan Benjoseph joined us. He had books for everyone and we enjoyed a very traditional dinner. Then we took the Abrahams back to their hotel and the rest of us went to the airport. The VAT line was long but worth the wait. Fifty minutes from JFK. Had a very comfortable flight in first class. Pretty amazing thanks to Nate. This trip will never be forgotten. Once again, the magic happened and we all got to know each other and we became a family. We had an incredible group of people.