



On December 20 thirty-five teens from Omaha joined thirty-five teens from the Partnership's consortium for a trip to Israel.

Rabbi Ari Dembitzer of Beth Israel Synagogue, Rabbi Steven Abraham of Beth El Synagogue, and Cantor Wendy Shermet of Temple Israel were trip leaders/chaperones. After arriving in Tel Aviv at Ben Gurion airport, the group began its travels throughout the country. Parents, relatives and friends were able to vicariously participate in the journey by following posts on a Facebook page that had been established for the trip. The excitement for being there was evident throughout, and carried over to their return to Omaha. Upon their return we asked them for their comments about the trip.



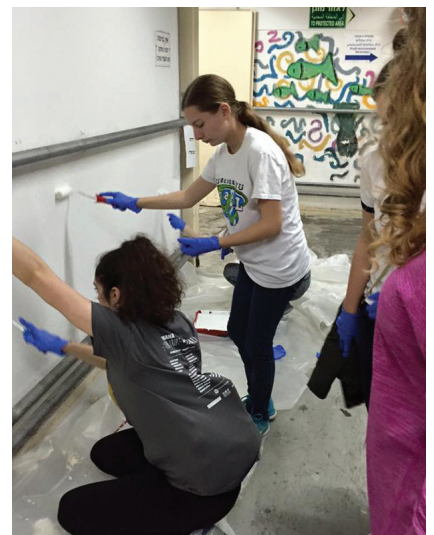
We thank those in our community who made this opportunity possible. The Shirley & Leonard Goldsten Supporting Foundation, The Herbert Goldsten Foundation, The Lois Jeanne Schrage Memorial Fund, the Phillip & Terri Schrage Supporting Foundation, the Carl Frohm Memorial Foundation, the Jewish Federation of Omaha, Beth El Synagogue, Beth Israel Synagogue, and Temple Israel.



Rabbi Steven Abraham commented that the trip fulfilled his expectations for what he hoped it would be, and in fact exceeded them in many ways. “The trip to Israel with our thirty-five Omaha teens was amazing,” he said. He observed that there are not that many opportunities to get to know the youth in Omaha who are outside of his own synagogue, and this trip was a great opportunity to do so. “It was great to form our own special group as we traveled throughout Western Galilee, the Golan Heights, Jerusalem and the Sinai. What better way to become acquainted with one another than in a place that is already our home?” Rabbi Abraham also observed that “sometimes you forget that when you are on trips like this, not only are you seeing people and places, but people are seeing you. “I was extremely proud to be a part of this group that was seen by Israelis. These young people demonstrated such maturity and camaraderie.” In summing up the experience he said, “I believe that they came away with a greater appreciation of the importance of the State of Israel as well as their own Jewish identity.”



Rabbi Ari Dembitzer related that teen mission trips to Israel such as this are very important to establish a sense of identity. “Being a Jewish teenager in Omaha, Nebraska can be confusing. **Once they visit Israel, they learn that they have a place that will always be home.**” As a spiritual man, Rabbi Ari shared that he focused on “sapping the spiritual out of every place we visited and everything at that place. It gives an added depth of meaning to visit the places of the Bible – the Bible comes alive for them. **This group came back home yearning to know more and study more. That is a tremendous outcome.**” Rabbi Ari told a story that took place over 100 years ago. “A young rabbi from Romania made his first trip to Israel, and at that time the journey was difficult - there was no airline travel. After experiencing the country and on his return trip home, he realized that he had not acquired something from Israel to give to his rabbi as he had promised. It was difficult for him to own up to this when he met with the older rabbi. In the course of the conversation, the young rabbi removed his coat that was packed with mud because of a fall he had taken. Dried dirt fell to the floor. The older rabbi scooped up the dirt and exclaimed, ‘You have brought me the best gift of all. You have brought me Israel!’ **This trip brought Israel to these teens.**”



Cantor Wendy Shermet smiled broadly when asked about the trip. “I can say for sure that all thirty-five teens and three chaperones from Omaha were grateful for taking this trip together. **We shared a lot of fun and laughter and at the same time we experienced Israel in a meaningful and personal way.**” She then quietly reflected that each teen found something that was particularly meaningful to him or her. “They all seemed very engaged wherever we went. Even when it seemed like there was more ‘lecture’ than ‘experiencing,’ these teens got all they could from every place we visited.” She shared that many of the participants would put the stay in Akko as one of their top highlights. For others, they were incredibly moved by Yad Vashem. They all enjoyed the time they were able to spend with Israeli teens. “This group of Omaha teens doesn’t always get to spend time together, and this trip gave them the opportunity for that. There was no ‘drama,’ there was no leaving anyone out. Everyone got to know each other better. And as chaperones, the three of us got to know each other better as well.” After a brief pause Cantor Shermet added, **“I am convinced that through this experience this group of teens will be able to leave for college better prepared to talk about Israel with Jews and non-Jews alike. That is comforting to know.”**

