

# Interfaith

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have sung or danced as the boat cruised in view of the Golan Heights and Syria in the distance. Our dancing brought together two religious traditions, two faiths meshed into one brother and sisterhood. Gone were political divisions and theological schisms. Present were individuals sharing a love of Israel and demonstrating how what we had in common was a love of faith. Throughout the week we shared each other's traditions, songs, prayers, and teachings. Over a delicious meal in an outdoor restaurant overlooking the Kinneret, I shared conversation with a couple who have dedicated their lives to spreading their faith. We learned from one another.

One digression: During that dinner overlooking the Kinneret, a young man from Mexico was called up to the stage in honor of his Bar Mitzvah. He was wearing a Boston Red Sox hat, something noticeable to a group which included a legendary ex-Yankee. Eventually, the boy was introduced to Mariano, who graciously shared a brief message on the family's video devise. For the most part, however, our journey was totally devoted to the spirit. The Red Sox-Yankee rivalry is for another time and place.

We Rabbis were thrilled to be



The NYBR/Mariano Mission at Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, Israel on July 31, 2018; in the front row Rabbi Potasnik (left) and Rabbi Klayman (right).

sharing our traditions. Friday night dinner included Kiddush and an explanation about how we bless our children. We visited the Western Wall a couple of times; the first time being Thursday night at midnight.

Dead Sea, famous since the time of Abraham and known to be close to the Jordan River source where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. We visited the Cardo/Jewish Quarter together, sharing both the Tomb of David

One concluding anecdote with a Rabbi's interpretation: En route to the Dead Sea, we stopped at Ein Gedi, one of my favorite spots in Israel. For some reason, our guide did not want anyone climbing to the

At the foot of Ein Gedi, together we began climbing the mountain. Together, we did not quite reach the ultimate oasis (the waterfall), but in unity we still initiated a climb. Certainly, no interfaith Mission of twenty people will establish world peace or resolve all the divisions which separate us. We did not reach the top of that Ein Gedi mountain, but at least we began the journey. Any hope for universal peace and mutual respect must begin with an initial climb. It may take another generation to reach the top of that climb, but they will have built upon the foundation we established for them.

The journey toward our ultimate goal begins with a modest dialogue, a willingness to overcome our differences and to speak honorably with each other about any political or social issue which keeps us divided. I am proud to have begun such a journey, and to have done so with a group of loving human beings whose respective faiths brought us together in a bond of love. Visiting Israel again re-enforced my faith. Knowing that my love for Israel is shared by a remarkable group of devout Christians re-enforces my faith even more.

*Rabbi Michael Klayman is Rabbi of the Lake Success Jewish Center and the president of the Great Neck Clergy Association.*

**The next day's visit to predominantly Christian sites was the most spiritually enriching and inspiring of our journey.**

Whatever issues I have about the religious authorities at the Wall and the lack of pluralism and gender equality (and I have many such issues), this trip was not the occasion for such a conversation, important as it may be. Our Mission focused on a positive love for Israel, and on conveying that love through our respective faiths. We visited the

on Mt. Zion and the room where the Last Supper took place. On Shabbat, the Church contingent visited the Mount of Olives and other Christian historical sites in the Old City.

By the end of the trip we all recognized how special was our journey and our friendship.

waterfall. Consequently, he stopped us at one of the lower pools. As I am a renegade soon-to-be senior citizen, I ignored the request and continued to the waterfall itself. After some razzing for describing an Ein Gedi no one else saw, I showed my photos of the waterfall and why it is such a popular site for all travelers.

## Needs

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with disabilities. They were often sent to programs far away and were not included in communal life — in shuls, schools, businesses. There was very little interaction."

The social recreational programs with which Yachad launched remain core to its mission. From the outset, those programs sought to include both special-needs individuals and their mainstream peers. Today the organization runs everything from summer camps to employment programs for adults with disabilities.

It also educates and trains synagogue and youth leaders about inclusion. The Connecticut retreat included a leadership program for some 30 able-bodied eighth-graders nominated by their schools to receive leadership training and hands-on opportunities to engage with individuals with disabilities.

Saadya Ehrenpreis, a 34-year-old with Down syndrome, has been to many Yachad Shabbatons and activities, including vocational training and summer camps. But until three

years ago, his mother had never joined him at a retreat for families. Ahava Ehrenpreis was concerned that it would be too overwhelming for her.

But she finally gave in, and found the weekend helpful and enjoyable. To date, she has gone on three retreats.

"It's a warm, very relaxed, upbeat atmosphere," Ahava said. "It's also been very lovely to meet and give faces to the Yachad staff, who I usually see only as email addresses. The mentors are enthusiastic, caring young people whose joy and affection for the Yachad members is palpable. What parent does not want to see that up close and personal?"

She credited a Shabbaton last year with transforming Saadya's life because she learned of a new program for adults with special needs that was opening at Yeshiva University. Saadya ended up enrolling in the program, called the Makor College Experience, which provides opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to experience college life, explore interests and develop skills as they transition into independence.

One of the greatest challenges for

individuals who have disabilities is attaining jobs as adults, according to Lichtman. The problem isn't so much limitations to their abilities, he said, as it is employers who can't see beyond their disabilities.

"Too often people with disabilities are rejected because employers think they can't do something or they won't," Lichtman said. "But more often than not they can and they will, if given the chance."

Individuals in Yachad's vocational program start by getting a work placement according to their skills and interests. An onsite job coach helps them acclimate to the environment and the work. Participants gradually progress to the point where they no longer need the job coach.

"A common thread with them is that they are so dependable," said Hillel Tuchman, who has employed three Yachad-affiliated individuals at the Atlantic Freight Brokers Corp. in Brooklyn. "Once they are set up there is rarely an issue. I know if we give them something to do they will get it done."

*Hiram Reisner is a freelance writer and editor.*

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