

An Interfaith Experience

An enlightening spiritual journey of Israel through an interfaith lens

By MICHAEL KLAYMAN

Over my life I have visited Israel numerous times as a student, tourist, and professional. My trip to Israel this past August was unlike any other.

FIRST PERSON

Along with three colleagues and three Jewish lay leaders, I participated in a unique, six-day interfaith Mission, sponsored by the New York Board of Rabbis. We joined with the Refugee of Hope, a Church in Westchester; the Church participants were led by Mariano and Pastor Clara Rivera. All of them are active in their Church and devout in their faith. Together we shared our love for Israel; together we experienced an Israel from both Jewish and Christian eyes.

It was an extraordinary and enlightening spiritual journey...

By visiting sites of Christian and



The NYBR/Mariano Mission with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem, Israel on July 31, 2018; author Rabbi Michael Klayman in the front row, third from right.

Israel I shared with a remarkable group of people.

On our first complete day we visited two sites generally off the beaten tourist path.

Our first visit was to Rambam Hospital in Haifa. The hospital

diers went into Syria searching for her brothers. We learned about an Israel rarely shared by the electronic and print media: An Israel which cares for the sick, regardless of religion, nationality, or race. It is this Israel which resonated with a bonding group of Christians and Jews. At Rambam there is no distinction between Jew, Arab, Christian, or Druze. When it comes to their healing the sick, there are no national boundaries. The health and dignity of every patient is Rambam's principle creed.

Later that day we visited Michve Alon, an educational IDF military base in the Galilee. Michve Alon welcomes new soldiers with weak command of Hebrew (such as new immigrants), soldiers from Druze and Bedouin communities, and soldiers from challenging or troubling environments. Their objective is to help acculturate these young people into the army and into the general society. We met soldiers and commanders from South America, Ethiopia, and Illinois; soldiers from Druze and Bedouin communities. At Michve Alon the leaders are not just commanders but impressive educators. When we recited a prayer for Israeli Defense Forces, we were praying for an army with extended arms that embrace all segments of Israeli society. Again, the Israel of Michve Alon is not the Israel visible in the international headlines.

Both of these remarkable institutions reflect Israel's desire to bring together all segments of the nation. Due to the nature of our interfaith Mission, both experiences made an indelible impression on all of us.

For me (the following comment might surprise you), the next

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

We began with Capernaum, site of an ancient synagogue as well as a place where Jesus preached and healed others. Capernaum is mentioned in all the Gospels; it is a site shared by Jews and Christians. As a Jew, I was inspired by the gen-



Pastor Clara Rivera at the shore of the River Jordan on August 1, 2018.

uine love of devout Christians for the Land of Israel, their passion for the Bible and their deeply rooted faith.

We then visited the Mount of the Beatitudes, long considered the place where Jesus gave his Sermon on the Mount. It was at this spot where our two faiths merged together in genuine spirit. Our Christian brothers and sisters celebrated their savior in prayer and spirited song. We then linked arms as I led our entire group in Oseh Shalom and Hinay Mah Tov, two songs dedicated to peace and universal partnership.

We also visited Tabgha, an area in the Galilee where Jesus per-

formed the miracle of the loaves and fishes. The Church of the Multiplication (probably built in the fourth century) is home to a beautiful mosaic floor, which commemorates the miracles of fish and bread, with which Jesus fed a needy audience. At Tabgha stands the Church of the Primacy of St Peter, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (the Kinneret). The Church is memorialized as another site where Jesus appeared to his disciples and conferred 'primacy' upon them.

It was at Yardenit, however, that I witnessed the most inspiring ceremony. Yardenit is the Baptismal Center on the Jordan River (If you have never seen the Jordan, you can walk across the river in approximately ten seconds...). Here, many of our Church friends were re-baptized in the historical waters. One by one, each stood before Pastor Clara, and received a blessing before immersing in the water. Each individual ceremony was greeted with applause and cheer. When everyone had been

baptized, the celebrants joined hands for moments of prayer and song.

During one of our evening dinners, we went around the table and shared a memorable experience from the trip – so far. A rabbinic colleague spoke about how emotional it was to see Israel through the eyes of our Church participants. I agree, for at Yardenit we Rabbis witnessed a celebration and we vicariously shared in their joy.

Before visiting Yardenit we took a boat ride on the Kinneret (I prefer using the Hebrew term). Like me, many of you have taken this ride before; continued on page 27



Left to Right: Maj. Saleh Halabi, Deputy Commander of the Michve Alon IDF base, Mariano Rivera shaking hands with Brig. Gen. Res. Effi Idan, FIDF Executive Director, and Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, in Israel on July 31, 2018.

Jewish interest we had the opportunity to appreciate Israel from new dimensions and to celebrate our respective faiths in worship, song, friendship, and mutual respect.

came under attack from Hezbollah in 2006, during the second war with Lebanon. Since then, the hospital (among other unique features) has built an underground emer-

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Aside from visiting Israel's President Reuven Rivlin and David Friedman, U.S. Ambassador to Israel, our journey was an intensely spiritual one; devoid of both politics and baseball. To the Jewish World readership I do not need to write about the Israel you know. Instead, I want to write about an Israel you may not know – an

gency facility, along with an underground parking lot that can be transformed – within seventy hours – into a 2000 bed hospital. Aside from visiting the underground facility, what stood out for us were memorable comments from the staff. We learned about the hospital treating a Syrian girl with leukemia, and how IDF sol-