My Trip to Israel

Visiting Israel was the culmination of over 13 years of *frustrated* planning. I first began researching different tour companies to the Holy Land back in 2010. But no sooner than I paid the deposit for a tour, the trip would get canceled. The reasons varied with the circumstances. On two occasions, violence against tourists by Palestinian terrorists led nervous travelers in my group to cancel their bookings, which forced the cancellation of the tours. And then the Covid pandemic hit and the Israeli government enacted a travel ban to avoid the spread of the disease. When the ban was lifted in 2022, I quickly booked a tour for that fall thinking now would be a good time to go, but the resurgence of a deadly Covid variant that summer put those plans on ice, as well. *Oy vey*!

By the time I booked *this* trip to Israel, for May of 2023, I wasn't even cautiously optimistic. I had been disappointed so many times already I adopted a pessimistic wait-and-see attitude, half anticipating a cancellation letter from the tour company as the departure date loomed near. I guess 'fifth time' was the charm because the tour proceeded as scheduled. This 12-day trip was booked through a travel company I have used frequently in the past. It was billed as a small group tour, which means the size of the tour group would be limited to no more than 22 individuals (we actually had twenty).

I must admit, prior to embarking on this trip I had no idea how *fragile* the situation between Palestinians and Israelis had become. Don't get me wrong, I'm not naïve about what is going on over there, it's just that this conflict has dragged on now for so many decades I am reminded of a line by comedian Dennis Miller who once said, "fighting broke out today between Israelis and the Palestinians…*in case you needed to set your watch*". Besides, with much of the world news at the time focused on Russia's brutal assault on the Ukraine I was easily distracted. I register all my trips abroad with the State Department (under their Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or STEP) and the advisories they sent me via email did contain warnings about the instability of the region and to exercise extreme caution, but they stopped short of saying travel to Israel should be avoided, so I didn't think much about it. Believe me, I have visited countries with far worse travel warnings than Israel (Honduras and El Salvador immediately come to mind).

My only *real* concern was the ongoing civil protests by Israelis against Prime Minister Netanyahu's rightwing coalition government that was attempting to overhaul the Israeli judicial system. As my departure date approached, televised reports of growing rallies and civil protests against these judicial reforms were all over the news, suggesting that Israel might be on some kind of crossroads concerning its future as a democracy. But somehow this didn't scare me off. I mean, really, if I wanted to experience political turmoil… *I might as well just stay home*. No, political unrest, at least as it pertained to Israel, was not a deal breaker for me. I had been dreaming of visiting Israel for such a long time I was not going to let anything dissuade me from going…um, especially now that I could.

The country didn't fail to live up to its billing, either. I saw so many fascinating historical sites I can't wait to describe it all in this journal. But, on the flip side, I also experienced a 'precursor' to the horrible war that would soon break out between Hamas and Israel. As our tour group arrived in Jerusalem, just four days before the trip ended, the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) targeted several homes in the Gaza Strip hiding Palestinian terrorists, resulting in the deaths of almost two-dozen people. This prompted an immediate response from the militant group known as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad whose members were killed in the Israeli airstrike. During the next several days more than five hundred rockets were launched into Israel…*while I was still in the country*. Thankfully, almost all of them were shot down by Israel's vaunted Iron Dome air defense system. News of these constant rocket barrages is what awaited me every morning when I turned the TV on in my hotel room. Our guide told us to head for the stairwells in case we heard sirens going off. (*Gulp*). The only reason I wasn't *overly* concerned was due to the reaction of the Israelis themselves, who appeared calm considering all those incoming rockets, as if this was 'par for the course' over there. In fact, other than a little extra military presence in certain areas around the Old City, life in Jerusalem – at least from this outsider's perspective – seemed normal.

So you can only imagine my shock and utter dismay when five months later the horrifying events of October 7, 2023 unfolded. Hamas and the smaller Palestinian Islamic Jihad orchestrated a well-planned assault on Israel by air, land and sea, taking the IDF by complete surprise. Well, I'm not sure if 'complete surprise' is accurate. After the attack, there were reports in the media that Egyptian intelligence officials and other sources may have warned Israel that Hamas was planning something big, but for whatever reason the IDF was still caught off guard. The assault led to the deaths of more than 1,200 Israelis and the kidnapping of over 240 more who were dragged back to the Gaza Strip and held hostage. Most of the

victims were innocent civilians who were gunned down on the streets or in their homes or at public gatherings.

The gruesome severity (and alacrity) accompanying this terrorist attack shocked the world. It would be the single largest loss of life in Israel since the country's independence. But the initial outpouring of support and sympathy Israel received following the attack of October 7th proved to be short-lived. The Israeli retaliation against Hamas intensified into a months-long bombing campaign designed, *apparently*, to wipe the Gaza Strip off the face of the earth. As a result, over forty thousand Palestinians (many of them women and children) have already died – as of this writing – and the Gaza Strip's infrastructure has been totally decimated, creating an enormous humanitarian crisis. All of this has left me with an uncomfortable mix of emotions. I have to ask myself: at what point does 'an eye for an eye' go too far? Believe me, I am an ardent supporter of Israel's right to exist, but the plight of innocent Palestinians dying by the thousands also weighs heavily on my thoughts.

While on tour, before everything came to a boil, I heard compelling arguments from both sides in this on-going conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which I will share throughout this journal. But following the events of October 7th and its aftermath I don't know how these two groups will – in the short term, anyway – be able to reconcile their differences. Perhaps they never will. The stated goal of the more extremist Palestinian militants (and their regional supporters) is to eliminate the State of Israel altogether; on the other hand, Israel has the fundamental right to defend itself against external attacks. And even if the Palestinians were to achieve statehood in the near future, I believe the deep-seated animosity and suspicions that exist between Israelis and Palestinians will continue to plague the Middle East for years to come. Sadly, in this part of the world hatred is often too easily passed down from generation to generation.

The purpose of this journal is not to take sides in this conflict. My goal is to simply describe what I saw and did. But I will need to bring up the issue from time to time because it plays such an important backdrop when visiting Israel. In fact, it is the number one reason people give for *not* traveling to Israel. Another thing I will avoid is harping on religious beliefs. This tour allowed me to see some incredibly significant religious sites, yet I did not go to Israel to 'find God', as it were. I was raised a Roman Catholic but stopped believing in organized religion by the time I graduated college. My desire to see Israel was based more on history than anything else. Three of the most important religions on earth (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) can all trace their origins to this region. Events that

occurred here thousands of years ago still have an enormous influence on human culture, and I wanted to see some of the places I have been hearing and reading about since I was a kid. So, yeah, I was pretty excited about going.

Preparations for this tour were easy. Americans do not need to apply for a short-term tourist visa, and by now the Covid travel restrictions had been lifted. Back in late 2022, before my fourth planned trip to Israel was cancelled, I had purchased roundtrip airfare through El Al Airlines (they offer a direct flight to Tel Aviv from Miami). I was given a credit voucher for the airfare, which I was able to redeem on this trip, saving me a little money on the overall cost of the tour. On the morning of Wednesday, May 3rd of 2023, my friend Albert drove me to Miami International Airport where I began my much-anticipated trip to Israel…

Days One and Two

At 8:45am I was standing in line just in front of the El Al ticket counter being interviewed by a young female security officer employed by the airline. Before (non-Israeli) passengers can proceed to the El Al counter they are first asked a series of questions, which in my case amounted to a mini- interrogation. I guess a solo male traveler to Israel (who doesn't look like a rich CEO) raises 'red flags' and I was asked why I was visiting the country, who did I know there, where was I staying and so forth. Another security officer was doing a background check on my passport, flipping through all the entry stamps from different parts of the world, encouraging the young woman to ask me more questions. When she found out I had been to Jordan and Egypt, she wanted to know why. She was also very interested in my trips to Russia in 2017 and to Myanmar in 2018.

By now I had been providing this woman with personal information for nearly ten minutes and I was growing a little impatient. But 'growing impatient' is something they are trained to look for, I guess, and she kept the pedal to the metal. So persistent she was in her line of questioning that the possibility of me not being able to board the plane began to cross my mind. I decided to switch gears and started asking *her* questions. Why are you making so many inquiries? I'm a tourist, for crying out loud, booked on a guided tour by a reputable company…don't you

want tourists to go to Israel? I even showed her my website. But she only let up when the other security officer returned my passport and said something to her in Hebrew. She then smiled sweetly and let me proceed, telling me to enjoy my stay in Israel. And for the record, it is comforting that El Al takes such stringent measures in the pursuit of safety. If any airline needs to be wary of suspicious passengers, it is Israel's flagship carrier. So, kudos to El Al Airlines…*and a heads up to everyone else*!

The seats in regular economy class were so confining I was grateful nobody sat in the middle seat. The window passenger was a young, attractive Israeli woman who had been on military leave in the U.S. and was now returning to Israel to finish her obligatory two-year national service. She was very friendly, and I thought perhaps I could pick her brain for suggestions on what to do in Tel Aviv during my free time, but as soon as the plane reached cruising altitude she slouched down in her seat and promptly fell asleep for most of the flight. I would occasionally glance at her and feel envious. Meanwhile, the guy in front of me reclined his seat so far back I could smell his hair conditioner. What a *putz*.

We touched down in Tel Aviv at 6:45am local time. The flight lasted 11 hours and 15 minutes. I was able to sleep maybe two hours total, but I was neither sleepy nor tired. In fact, I was quite excited and eager to see Tel Aviv. Officially, the city is named Tel Aviv-Yafo (although, most Israelis just refer to it as Tel Aviv, and so will I throughout this journal). On my way to the immigration section I stopped to get an electronic gate pass from a bank of machines set up by the border control office. Without this pass (which should always remain with your passport) you cannot enter or leave the country. I breezed through immigration and proceeded to get my luggage. Because I had booked my own airfare I was the only member of my tour group arriving at this early hour. A representative from the tour company was holding up a sign when I exited the terminal building and he led me to an awaiting taxicab, instructing the driver to take me to the Melody Atlas Boutique Hotel on HaYarkon Street. Normally, the drive should have taken twenty minutes but due to the morning rush hour it took nearly an hour. I reached the hotel by 8:10am.

Check-in wasn't until 3:00pm. Prior to my trip I had informed the tour company of my early morning arrival and supposedly arrangements had been made with the hotel to have a room ready for me when I got there. This was not the case, though. The front desk had no knowledge of me arriving at this hour and they told me nothing would be available until around noon. I used the hotel bathroom to freshen up and then left my luggage in a secured room near the lobby, removing

first my small nylon backpack to carry around my camera, batteries, pen, paper and water bottle. I obtained a tourist map of the city from the front desk and then hit the streets for the next three hours.

My hotel was located along HaYarkon Street, in what is the 'Old North' (*Hatzafon Hayashan*) section of Tel Aviv. The Old North refers to the neighborhoods built during the 1930s and 1940s just north of the historic city center. Across from the hotel is Independence Park, a recreational waterfront greenspace with paved trails and a dog park. I figured I might as well start there. I crossed the street and spent a few minutes walking through the area. The park is situated atop a former limestone hill overlooking the Mediterranean coastline below. Its first trees were planted on Israel's Independence Day back in May of 1948. It has several interesting sculptures and monuments, including two statues dedicated to King Asa and King Yehoshafat, a father and son who served as the third and fourth kings of the Kingdom of Judah in biblical times. It's a pretty bizarre monument, with the statues looking more like wrapped mummies peering out over the sea. Adjacent to the park (or part of it) is the Hilton Tel Aviv.

From the park I descended to a promenade that stretches for roughly 5.7 kilometers from Nordau Beach all the way south to the Jaffa Port. The promenade was renamed after Shlomo Lahat, a former Tel Aviv mayor who was in office during its renovation and expansion in the late 1990s. City residents simply refer to it as the Promenade, or *Tayelet*. Because this is a Mediterranean city, it has *numerous* beaches spread out over a wide, well-maintained beachfront that can give South Florida a run for its money. In fact, I had no idea Tel Aviv was so beautiful. I began walking south along the promenade near Nordau Beach, which is the only religious beach in the city. And by that, I mean it is segregated between the sexes; women can use it three days out of the week on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday, while men can use it on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Saturday – the Jewish Sabbath when observant Jews do not go to the beach – anyone can use it. This beach also has a wall erected around it for privacy.

I continued south from Nordau Beach, past the Hilton Hotel and stopped to photograph the yachts and sailboats docked at the Tel Aviv Marina. Beyond the marina was Gordon Beach. From this point forward on my right-hand side was one continuous white sandy beach after another for the next several kilometers, with names like Frishman Beach, Bugrashov Beach, Trumpeldor Beach, Jerusalem Beach, Geula Beach, Blue Flag Beach, Banana Beach, Aviv Beach and Tupim Beach (and these were just the beaches of central Tel Aviv). Some were empty beaches while others offered amenities such as beach chairs and oversized

umbrellas, boardwalks and exercise parks. You'll also see some monuments and statutes erected along the promenade. On my left, hotels and condominiums lined the seafront, reminding me of Miami Beach, Florida. The only thing lacking were the large crowds. The prime beach-going season here is from May to August when the temperatures hover between mid-70s to low-90s (Fahrenheit). Incidentally, this is also the most expensive time to visit Tel Aviv (and the hottest) with most of the hotels near the beaches booked solid. I arrived at the beginning of May, so I don't think the summer season had really kicked in yet.

The sea plays an important role in the Tel Aviv lifestyle, and water sports are very popular, from windsurfing to catamarans to jet skis. But on this day there wasn't anyone in the water. I think it was due to the strong wind currents. I read online that the beaches here use a flag system to let beachgoers know when it is safe to swim; white flags signal the water is fine, while red and black flags denote dangerous currents. What I did see were plenty of very-fit, mostly young Israelis exercising on the sandy shores the further I walked. I witnessed many friendly volleyball and beach soccer matches in progress, in addition to groups of both young and old performing yoga, calisthenics and stretching exercises out in the open. The vibe this gave off was wonderful. I fell in love with Tel Aviv almost immediately, it seemed like a fun city to live in, both vibrant and laidback at the same time… if that makes any sense.

After nearly an hour I reached Charles Clore Park, a large beachfront greenspace just beyond Tupim Beach and decided to start making my way back. The buildings along the beachfront offered an eclectic mix of architectural designs, from modern structures to Art Deco. The following morning I learned about the unique architecture of Tel Aviv during our tour of the city, so I will go over it in more detail when I get to that part of the journal. Near Bugrashov Beach I crossed Retsif Herbert Samuel Street, which runs parallel to the beachfront, walking past London Garden, a plaza with a stone monument to those killed by the air raid Blitz on London during WWII. On the northern end of this plaza I came across the first of many bomb shelters I would see in the city throughout my stay in Tel Aviv. A portend of things to come, I guess.

At the next corner I turned right onto Frishman Street, walking six blocks east to Dizengoff Street, one of the most famous avenues in central Tel Aviv. This street played an essential role in the overall development of Tel Aviv and was once described as the "Champs-Elysees of Tel Aviv". It runs from the Tel Aviv Port area in the north all the way to Ibn Gabirol Street (another major commercial avenue within central Tel Aviv) in the south. The street was named after the city's

first mayor, Meir Dizengoff. Located along this street is the Dizengoff Center, Tel Aviv's first shopping mall. I read online that the mall, completed in the early 1980s, is attributed to the decline of Dizengoff Street from its former heyday. I'm not sure how, though. Perhaps the increase in traffic hastened some of the urban decay now associated with parts of this famous avenue. I actually thought it looked pretty nice. The sections heading north from Dizengoff Square had tree-lined streets, small shops and outdoor cafes. A wonderful place to take a stroll.

I stopped to photograph Dizengoff Square, a large roundabout that was constructed in the 1930s (and renovated several times since) and lies at the juncture of six different streets. In the center is a water fountain designed by Israeli artist Yaacov Agam, recognized as one of the founders of the kinetic art movement, a style that uses geometric patterns or sculptures to give the perception of different angles or movement. Locals like to sit on the benches around the fountain to take a respite from shopping. The Dizengoff Center shopping mall is located just down the street. From here I walked north along Dizengoff Street for about ten blocks and made a left on Zeev Jabotinsky Street, walking back to the Melody Hotel. It was now 11:30am. I sat in the lobby for 30 minutes drinking a cup of coffee until the front desk notified me my room was ready. I was a little disappointed; the room was *very* small. I had to use the armchair ottoman in one corner as a desk since there was no table in the room. After jotting down some notes in my journal notebook I set my cellphone alarm clock for 5:00pm and got some much-needed shuteye. With the exception of two hours on the plane, I had now been awake for 26 hours and could barely keep my eyes open. I slept solidly until the alarm went off. I took a shower and put on a new T-shirt. I then busied myself sorting out the clothes I would be wearing for the next two days while intermittingly watching the CNN international news broadcast on TV.

At 7:00pm I went downstairs to the lobby for the tour's official orientation meeting. Our tour director, Alon, was waiting for us. For the meeting we sat in a section of the lobby instead of a conference room, the first time I ever experienced this. It was noisy and a little distracting. At times I couldn't hear what Alon or some of the others were saying unless I was sitting right next to them. I was a tad upset. But I needn't have been. Alon surmised we were all pretty jet-lagged at this point and didn't want to have a long drawn-out meeting. He introduced himself and formally welcomed us to Israel. Alon appeared to be in his late 30s, had a trimmed beard and looked physically fit. He had a deep voice but spoke softly, maintaining a neutral tone regardless of the information he was imparting. And let me tell you, this man knew how to explain things. He was, without a doubt, one of the most knowledgeable tour directors I've ever come across. By the time I left

Israel, I felt I had an intimate grasp of this country's history due to his thorough explanations and unique insights. His English was excellent. Both his parents were born in the United States but had resettled to Israel. He was born in Jerusalem. Like most Israelis, he did his obligatory stint in the military and then spent some time traveling before continuing his education. I'm not sure what he studied in college, but he told us he'd been a tour guide for a number of years.

We then took turns introducing ourselves. I don't recall now if everyone in the group was present for the orientation meeting. On most guided tours people arrive at staggering hours throughout the first or second day depending on their flight schedule and connecting stops. The members of my tour group consisted of (besides me): Shaune from Canada; Martha (who preferred Marti) from Florida; Betty and her husband Jerry from Florida; Susan and her husband Randy from California; Tony and Sally from (I think) Minnesota; Marybeth from Pennsylvania, and her friend Laura from California; Susie and her husband David from New Jersey; Shawna from Florida, together with her sister Michelle and her husband Ben from California; Becky and her husband Mike from Florida; and Pat and her husband Tom from California. If I got anyone's name or information wrong I apologize. Please feel free to contact me and I will correct any mistakes.

Alon briefly went over the usual protocols and expectations for the tour, handing out name and luggage tags and addressing the issue of being punctual. He also gave us listening devices for our daily outings. Finally, after going over some suggestions for dinner (which was on our own that evening) the group split up. It was now 8:15pm. I walked back to Dizengoff Street and withdrew 200 shekels from a bank ATM and then stopped at a local grocery store I had spotted on my earlier walk. I was too tired to eat in a restaurant by myself so I just purchased pita bread, soft cheese and spicy hummus and went back to my hotel room where I ate and watched some television before sleep overcame me.

Day Three

I woke up several times during the night. The combination of jet lag and my late afternoon nap the previous day played havoc on my circadian rhythm. It would

take me a few more days to get back into a proper sleeping pattern. I was fully awake by 3:45am. After performing my usual travel exercises and leg stretching routine I showered and had several cups of instant coffee while writing in my journal. I also watched the international news broadcasts on TV. At 7:00am I went downstairs where a small breakfast buffet had been set up in the lobby.

By 8:15am our group boarded a large, comfortable bus for our official tour of Tel Aviv. The bus driver was a young Israeli Arab named Hamoodi who was with us the entire trip. He was an excellent driver who smiled and was very polite but rarely said a word. I'm not sure if he spoke English. As the tour unfolded I noticed there didn't seem to be a lot of interaction between him and Alon. Don't get me wrong, they were both cordial and professional towards each other, but they didn't seem to exhibit the kind of close social rapport I've witnessed on other guided tours between drivers and tour directors. I wondered if this was intentional. By the end of the trip I could definitely sense the tension between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. The term 'Israeli Arabs' is used in Israel to describe Israeli Palestinians. Prior to the country's independence in 1948, there were approximately 950,000 Arabs (who identified as Palestinian) living within the territory that would eventually become Israel. Roughly 80 percent of them either fled or were expelled. But about 150,000 remained in the country and were later granted Israeli citizenship. Today, almost 2 million Israeli Arabs (or Palestinians) live in the country as legal citizens. These are the descendants of those Arabs who remained after the formation of the State of Israel. Whether or not they actually have the same rights as Israeli Jews is a matter I will discuss much later in this journal.

From the hotel we drove east along Zeev Jabotinsky Street for about a dozen blocks before making a right onto Ibn Gabirol Street, a residential and commercial thoroughfare with two lanes in each direction that carries traffic north and south through central Tel Aviv. Mostly storefronts and low-rise buildings lined this avenue. Our first stop was a short visit to Rabin Square, which is situated along Ibn Gabirol Street. We got off the bus in front of the Tel Aviv City Hall building directly across from the square to see the spot at the bottom of an escalator where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated on November 4th, 1995 after speaking at a rally in support of the Oslo Accords. The memorial erected on the spot where he died consists of a chained off section filled with large broken rocks, representing the tumultuous political earthquake his death unleashed. We watched a video presentation near the memorial explaining the events leading up to the assassination while Alon filled us in on some of the more important details. What follows is a brief, simplistic overview:

To understand why Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated, one has to understand the historical circumstances preceding his murder. By 1993, forty-five years after the formation of the State of Israel, the country was still locked in a perpetual battle for its own existence, confronting threats both internally and externally. The country had already fought three major wars with its Arab neighbors: the *Suez Crisis* of 1956 with Egypt, the *Six-Day War* of 1967 with Egypt, Jordan and Syria, and the *Yom Kippur War* of 1973 with Egypt and Syria. As a result of the Six-Day War, Israel greatly expanded its territory, acquiring the West Bank (and East Jerusalem) from Jordan, the Golen Heights from Syria, and the Sinai and Gaza Strip from Egypt. In addition to these wars there were periods of attritional warfare between Israel and its border enemies and a continuous insurgency by the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) which had formed in 1964 and was now recognized by the international community as the official representative of the Palestinian people. During the 1970s, the PLO moved its base of operations from Jordan to southern Lebanon and repeatedly carried out attacks against Israel, including terrorist attacks worldwide. Israel declared the PLO a terrorist organization and refused to negotiate with them. The IDF invaded southern Lebanon to try and oust the PLO from the region. Israeli incursions into Lebanon would continue throughout the 1980s; a long, drawn out confrontation that would include a new menace, Hezbollah, a Lebanese Muslim guerilla group backed by Iran. Israel has since created a security zone in southern Lebanon to protect its border from repeated attacks.

Starting with the 1978 Camp David Accords, Israel entered into a long series of negotiations that would, over the ensuing years, lead the way for peace between Egypt and Jordan. Throughout this peace process some tentative agreements concerning the future of the Palestinians were established. Israel returned some of the lands captured during the Six-Day War and eventually signed trade and diplomatic agreements with Egypt and Jordan. As for the Palestinians, their plight always seemed wrapped up in the vagueness of ‘future negotiations’ with the possibility of autonomous self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip at some point.

In 1987, Palestinians living in the annexed West Bank and Gaza Strip – angry at the slow pace of progress towards self-rule and coupled, I would imagine, by their undesirable living conditions – rose up in a sustained series of riots, protests and civil disobedience known collectively as the First Intifada. This would last into the early 1990s. By now, years of constant warfare (or the threat of it) and continuous violence and chaotic disruptions caused by the First Intifada were beginning to weigh heavily on the Israeli population, creating a political schism. Right wing Israelis refused to see the PLO as nothing more than terrorists aimed at

the destruction of the State of Israel and refused the idea of making any reconciliatory overtures or granting them self-rule in the occupied territories. On the other hand, left wing members of Israeli society were tired of all the perpetual violence and instability and were willing to negotiate if it meant lasting peace in the region.

When Rabin was elected prime minister in 1992, he ran on the Labor Party platform embracing the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process. Rabin was no stranger to warfare, nor was he particularly fond of Palestinians. He led a commando force during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and later served 27 years in the Israel Defense Force rising to its most senior rank. He oversaw Israel's victory during the Six-Day War in 1967 and served as defense minister from 1984 to 1990, initiating a brutal crackdown known as his "Iron Fist" policy during the First Intifada. In fact, universal condemnation of Israel's treatment of Palestinians during this time worsened the country's standing in the international community. Because Israel refused to negotiate directly with the PLO due to their terrorist activities, they relied on Egypt and Jordan to intervene. But in 1988, Jordan ended all legal and administrative claims to the West Bank and officially recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This was a huge setback for Israel as the country became increasingly isolated worldwide. Even the U.S., while branding the PLO a terrorist organization, had to acknowledge that without PLO participation, there could be no meaningful negotiations in the region.

By the 1990s, Rabin decided to switch tactics and sought to negotiate an end to the violence by having a direct dialogue with the PLO. This led to secret talks between the PLO and the Israeli government in Oslo, Norway, which became known as the Oslo peace process. By 1995, a pair of interim agreements had been signed between the two sides that would hopefully lead to a resolution of the Palestinian issue. The PLO agreed to recognize the State of Israel, and the Israeli government agreed to recognize the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and entered into bilateral negotiations with them. The Oslo Accords created the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) which was given a limited self-governing role over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip while future negotiations would hopefully hammer out the formation of a Palestinian state. But many sensitive issues still remained, like the question of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and who would control Jerusalem, and the continued security role Israel would exercise over the Palestinian territories. The Oslo Accords, while not perfect, were seen by the international community as a step in the right direction towards eventual peace in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, the Oslo peace process had many detractors. A large portion of the Palestinian population both in the territories and abroad were not in favor of the signed accords, which didn't go far or fast enough to secure a Palestinian homeland. Other Palestinian militant groups (like Hamas) were also against the peace process because they were still technically at war with Israel and wanted to eradicate the Jewish State altogether. In addition, there were some Muslim countries in the region which, for their own geopolitical purposes, did not want lasting peace with Israel and had been funding and training militants opposed to Israel for years and were trying to derail the whole process.

But perhaps the biggest detractors turned out to be the Israelis themselves. By 1995, more than 47 years of repeated warfare, skirmishes and terrorism against the State of Israel had deeply divided the country over how to deal with all these threats. Israel's conservative Likud Party and right-wing religious groups aligned themselves against Rabin and the Labor Party's push of the Oslo peace process. The notion of Israel forfeiting the occupied territories was seen by the people on the right as a total capitulation to Israel's enemies. On November 4, 1995, left-wing supporters organized a rally in support of the Oslo peace process in Kings of Israel Square (later renamed Rabin Square). Shortly after speaking at the rally, as Rabin walked towards his car, a far-right Israeli law student named Yigal Amir shot Rabin twice. He later died at the hospital. The 25-year old assailant, who was given a life sentence, said his actions were motivated by the Oslo peace process, which, if carried out, would have meant the withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank, denying Jews of their biblical heritage.

Despite the divisions within the country, the assassination of Rabin shocked not only Israel but the world itself. Two days later, at the Mount Herzl cemetery in Jerusalem, Rabin's funeral was attended by hundreds of foreign dignitaries, including about 80 heads of state. The assassination of the prime minister revealed a deep cultural and political divide within Israeli society that apparently has continued till this day. By the year 2000, with the failure of the Camp David Summit and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, the Oslo peace process slowly faded away. Sadly, the murder of Rabin achieved the stated goal of the assassin. Today, 28 years after his death, with the Israel-Hamas War entering its sixth month (as of this writing), the prospect of peace between Israelis and Palestinians appears hopelessly elusive.

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From Rabin Square we turned right on Frishman Street and headed to the beach area, eventually making a left on Retsif Herbert Samuel Street, which runs parallel to the beachfront, and continued south towards the Old City of Jaffa. During the drive, Alon was on the bus mic giving us interesting background information about Tel Aviv. The city has a population of almost half a million people. It is the economic and technological center of the country, boasting one of the best economies per capita in the entire Middle East, which is pretty remarkable considering its size. As such, Tel Aviv is ranked among the most expensive places in the world to live. The city also serves as an important educational center. Tel Aviv University, the largest university in Israel, has more than 30,000 students. According to Alon, the city is more liberal and secular than the rest of the country and is known as a 'party city' with a thriving nightlife. It is one of the few gay-friendly cities in that part of the world, with a large LBGT community, he said. It is also, as far as the rest of the country goes, a very *new* city.

What is today's Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 by the *Yishuv*, a term referring to the Jewish residents living in Palestine prior to the creation of the State of Israel. In 1902, Theodor Herzl (the Austro-Hungarian founder of political Zionism) published a utopian novel, *Altneuland*, about the return of Jews to the Land of Israel. A few years later, a Hebrew translation of that novel by Nahum Sokolow was published entitled *Tel Aviv*. The title, which means "Hill of Spring", was adopted as the name of this new Jewish settlement. It is derived from Tel Abib, a hilly town or city in ancient Iraq that is mentioned several times in the Book of Ezekiel in the Jewish bible.

Tel Aviv started out as a settlement on the outskirts of the ancient port city of Jaffa. At the time there were already other Jewish suburbs established around Jaffa, the oldest being the Neve Tzedek, a neighborhood located in what is now the southwestern part of the city. But the founders of Tel Aviv wanted to establish something truly special, a new modern city like those emerging in Europe. Tel Aviv was given township status within Jaffa in 1921 and became an independent municipality by 1934. At the end of WWII, Jewish migration into Tel Aviv outpaced that of the predominately Arab population of Jaffa. By 1950, two years after the formation of the State of Israel, Jaffa would be fully annexed and the combined cities would be renamed Tel Aviv-Yafo (although most Israelis simply call it Tel Aviv).

We continued south along the beachfront. Approximately 2 kilometers past Charles Clore Park – one of the last beaches before reaching the Old Jaffa Port area

– we came upon a roundabout called Yossi Carmel Square, beautifully decorated with a kaleidoscope of blooming flowers. Near this square we saw our first group of Israeli protestors. Rallies against the government's pending judicial reforms were ongoing all over the country. Israeli citizens, many wrapped in the national flag, were marching or holding rallies against what they perceived as the Netanyahu government's attempts to overhaul the nation's judicial system and undermine the legal process that has existed since the beginning of the state. Over the coming days we would witness these rallies everywhere we went in Israel. For the record, these were peaceful protests, with both small and large groups waving flags and chanting for an end to the judicial reforms they felt would turn the country into a religious rightwing dictatorship. I will discuss these reforms, and why they are so controversial, later in this journal.

Beyond Yossi Carmel Square we passed the famous limestone clock tower built in 1903 to honor one of the last sultans of the Ottoman Empire. For four centuries, beginning in the early 1500s, the Ottoman Empire controlled the Southern Levant, the historical region that includes Israel and the Palestinian territories. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire during WWI, the League of Nations proclaimed a mandate system dividing the Levant region into French and British administrations. The areas of what are now modern-day Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan were part of Mandatory Palestine, which was administered by the British from 1920 until 1948. France controlled the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon. Eventually, independent countries and kingdoms would emerge from these mandates. But at the time, while they were not called colonies, it certainly felt that way to the inhabitants, who resented their foreign overlords.

We arrived at the Old City of Jaffa around 9:30am. The structures along the winding streets and alleyways of the Old City were mostly built by the Ottomans, the area flourishing during the 19th century as a major port city. Underneath the Old City, which lies on a strategic outcrop overlooking the Mediterranean coastline, are the remains of ancient Jaffa, which are still being excavated today. In the bible, Jaffa (known as Joppa) was founded by Noah's son, Japheth, following the great flood. Archaeologists have unearthed remnants of the ancient city dating back to about 1800 BC, making Jaffa one of the oldest port cities in the world. It was founded by the Canaanites, a semitic-speaking peoples who made up the civilization of the Southern Levant in ancient times. Later on, the Ancient Greeks would refer to these people as the Phoenicians. Biblical scholars believe Israelite culture developed or is derived from Canaanite culture.

Throughout its history, Jaffa has repeatedly been conquered by warring factions in the Middle East, including the Crusaders. By the end of the 16th century, more than 80 years after the Ottomans had taken control of the region, Jaffa was a small town in ruins. Slowly, over the next two centuries, Jaffa began to grow. Christian churches and hostels were re-established to allow Christian pilgrims to visit the Holy Land. In 1799, Napoleon laid siege to Jaffa. He was angered when his envoys were killed delivering his ultimatum of surrender and he ordered the town ransacked and many of its inhabitants and defenders killed. By the early 19th century, following Napoleon's defeat, residential life returned to Jaffa, and many of the structures one sees in the Old City today were actually built from this point forward.

In 1820, a synagogue and hostel were established in Jaffa for Jews who wanted to make pilgrimages to the four holiest cities of Judaism (Jerusalem, Tiberius, Hebron and Safed). This was the basis of the Jewish community in Jaffa, most of them were Sephardic Jews. By the 1870s, the old defensive walls of Jaffa were torn down to make room for expansion. By this time there were approximately 800 or so Jews living in Jaffa. In the early 1900s, Jaffa had now extended eastward beyond the Old City. The Arab population had swelled considerably. In 1909, a group of Jews living in Jaffa moved to the sandy dunes just north of the Old City and established the Jewish settlement that was renamed Tel Aviv in 1910. The rest, as they say, is history.

Alon led us on a walking tour through the top of the hill that was once the original Old City, telling us about the significance of Jaffa's port during ancient (biblical) times. An important Levantine coastal city, ancient Jaffa's trade attracted different peoples and cultures throughout its history, allowing for the spread of new ideas and concepts. Towards the end of Ottoman rule, Jaffa was known for its emerging industries, especially its soap industry, and for its orange groves, which were modernized by the introduction of new farming and industrial machinery from the mid-1800s forward. Today, Jaffa's hybrid sweet orange (the Jaffa orange) is still a popular export item worldwide. Another major industry that flourished by the turn of the 20th century in Jaffa was publishing. During the 19th century, an influential middle-class of Arab Christians (primarily Greek Orthodox) developed in Jaffa. This group would form an intellectual elite within the Old City, establishing an important publishing industry, making Jaffa the hub of journalistic activity in Mandatory Palestine.

By the time the State of Israel was created, and Jaffa was annexed into the rest of Tel Aviv, the area of the original walled Old City had changed dramatically. It

had been bombed and heavily destroyed by the conflicts leading up to Israel's independence and mostly abandoned. By 1985, roughly 70 percent of the structures around the hilltop had been demolished and most of what is considered the original Old City is now covered by Abrasha Park (also called Ha-Pisga Garden), a small public park on top of the hill which offers wonderful views of Tel Aviv and its Mediterranean coastline. The park also has a small amphitheater where concerts are held during the summer. We began our tour of the 'Old City' by walking through Abrasha Park, which was created in 1970. I couldn't find any information online about its actual size, but one article claimed it was as large as two football fields. A wooden footbridge called the Wishing Bridge connects the park to the reconstructed Old City. The railings along this bridge have images of the different Zodiac signs. Legend has it that if you stand on the bridge touching your Zodiac sign your wish will come true. Yeah, right… *I'm still bald*.

Alon took us to see two gate statues within the park. The first was the Gate of Faith, a monument that oddly resembles a Mayan sculpture. It consists of two four-meter pillars and a top beam, all made of Galilean stone, representing the gateway into the Land of Israel. The sculptures on the pillars portray the promise of the land to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, while the beam connecting them represents the beginning of that promise by the capture of Jericho (and the Land of Israel) by Joshua. The monument was created in the mid-1970s by Jerusalem sculptor Daniel Kafri and has become a popular spot for tourists to take pictures. The other monument we saw was the Ramses II Gate. In the 1960s, archeologists excavated a part of a triumphal gate dating back to the 12th century BC, to the time of Egyptian pharaoh, Ramses II, providing evidence of the Egyptian Period over the Southern Levant. A replica of this stone gate, which once served as the entrance into a former mudbrick building, has been reconstructed within its own garden area; the pillars decorated with Egyptian hieroglyphics praising Ramses II.

From here we walked to a residential courtyard next to the park to see a most unusual sight, an actual orange tree suspended in mid-air by cables attached to the surrounding buildings; its roots neatly tucked inside a large, enclosed clay vessel. This 'living' sculpture was created by Israeli artist Ran Morin in 1993. The tree is kept alive through a hidden drip system and continues to produce fruit. The artist wanted to convey the parallels between modern society and nature (and, I'm assuming, give a nod to the importance of the orange tree to Jaffa's history). Suspended one foot off the ground, it is a baffling sight to come across.

We walked through a labyrinthine network of narrow alleys known as the Artists' Quarter, passing clothes boutiques, art galleries and museums, housed in

reconstructed Arab homes and sandstone buildings. Alon told us the majority of the original structures within the Old City were built under Ottoman rule during the 1800s, and what remains of them, from the warehouses along the coastline to the renovated or reconstructed buildings along the hillside, are now occupied by trendy restaurants, night clubs, museums and art shops.

We emerged from the Artists' Quarter onto Kedumim Square, the main square of the Old City. Beneath this square is a free underground visitor's center featuring large, illustrated descriptions of Jaffa's past. In one corner of the square stands a Franciscan church called the St. Peter's Church, built at the end of the 19th century in a *New Spanish Baroque* style. The original church (this was the third version) was constructed in 1654 over the site of a medieval citadel dating back to the crusaders. It was built to honor the role Jaffa played in Christianity. According to biblical accounts, Tabitha, one of Jesus' early disciples, lived in Jaffa sewing clothes for the poor. When she died, her mourners summoned Peter who was in Lydda (not far from Jaffa) and showed him the good works she had done. Peter then raised her from the dead; it is one of the miracles attributed to him. Alon gave us some time to look around the square. I went inside St. Peter's Church to take some photos. A priest was conducting Mass to a small group of parishioners. The interior looked like a typical European Catholic Church. The outer structure had a red brick façade with a tall bell tower. I read online that this church is the largest building in the Old City.

From Kedumin Square we walked down from the hilltop along Mifraz Shlomo Street, passing three excavated cast iron cannons used by the Ottomans during the early 1700s to protect the Jaffa Port from invaders. This section offered a lookout point with wonderful views of Tel Aviv's coastline. We also passed the Jaffa Museum of Antiquities, housed in a former Ottoman building which once served as the seat of the governor of Jaffa. According to Alon, this small but fascinating museum offers two forms of art: ancient artifacts and contemporary artwork. A little further down we stopped in front of the Mahmoudiya Mosque, the largest mosque in Jaffa (also known as the Great Mosque of Jaffa). The structure consists of several buildings arranged around three courtyards. Its original construction started in 1730, but most of what one sees today was done in 1812. From there we continued until we reached Yefet Street at the bottom of the hill and reboarded our tour bus.

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We drove a short distance to visit the old Neve Tzedek neighborhood of Tel Aviv. During the 1880s, several dozen Sephardic Jewish families left their over-crowded conditions in Jaffa and resettled just north of the Old City, establishing the first Jewish neighborhood outside of Jaffa called *Neve Tzedek* ('Abode of Justice'). Eventually, other Jewish neighborhoods would emerge around Neve Tzedek. At the turn of the 20th century, the area attracted many upcoming Jewish writers and artists. The buildings constructed along the narrow streets of its new quarter included contemporary architectural designs inspired by the Art Nouveau and Bauhaus art movements of the early 1900s, and there are many wonderful examples of this architectural style still standing today, not just in this neighborhood but throughout Tel Aviv.

As Tel Aviv continued to grow, the more affluent residents of Neve Tzedek began moving to newer neighborhoods just to the north. As a result, many of the buildings within Neve Tzedek became neglected or abandoned (the corrosive nature of the coastal climate didn't help, either), and by the 1960s the neighborhood was so rundown and suffering from urban decay that the city was making plans to tear it down to make way for high rise buildings. What saved the neighborhood was that many of its older structures were declared Israeli heritage sites. By the late 1980s, a concerted effort was underway to renovate and preserve these old buildings. This gentrification led to the rebirth of Neve Tzedek as a fashionable and trendy district. Today, the neighborhood has become an upscale market, its main streets are once again filled with artists' studios, outdoor cafes, restaurants and bars.

Our first stop in Neve Tzedek was a visit to HaTachana Park located between the beach and the eastern end of Shabazi Street, one of the more prominent streets in Neve Tzedek. The park itself is fairly new, planned and renovated within recent years. The reason we went there was to visit the Old Railway Station within the park. Built in 1892 by the Ottomans, this was the first train station in the Middle East, serving as the terminus for the Jaffa-Jerusalem railway. When the station was closed in 1948 the property became a neglected eyesore until the gentrification of Neve Tzedek. The station and the surrounding buildings and land space have since been transformed into a curious mix of historical structures, with refurbished rail cars on tracks leading to nowhere, and a public park surrounded by restaurants, cafes and interesting boutique shops. Alon had us sit in front of the old train station

(converted now into an outdoor café) while he gave us a little background information on the importance of this small terminus.

The building of the railway's narrow-gauge track was initiated in 1890, the idea was to connect the old coastal cities with Jerusalem. By the time it was completed in 1892, the length of the train journey from Jaffa to Jerusalem took about 3.5 to 4 hours, which, ironically, was the same time distance as if someone had taken a carriage. This led to snide remarks by the locals, who compared the speed of the train to a donkey. The railway was often referred to as 'the Sultan's ass'. Alon told us one particularly funny joke from that time period. A man is aboard the train when he sees his friend walking alongside the tracks. The man calls out to his friend, asking him where he's going. The friend replies he is on his way to Jerusalem. The man on the train then tells his friend to hop on because that was where the train was heading, too. His friend shouts back, *"No, no, that's okay, I'm in a hurry"*. (Yuk-yuk). Alon said that while the train wasn't very efficient, it did serve an important purpose, bringing modern concepts and technologies to the area, a catalyst for future modernization.

We left the old train station (the owner was not too happy we had taken up so many tables without ordering anything) and walked through the adjacent park towards Shabazi Street. Along the way, Alon pointed out a Hoopoe scavenging for bugs on the ground. This is the national bird of Israel, a beautiful creature with a head framed by a distinctive crest of long orange feathers with black tips and a fawn-colored body with black barring on its wings. I couldn't recall ever seeing one before and took its picture. We reached Shabazi Street and followed it for about three blocks, turning into a large courtyard housing the Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance and Theater. After using the restrooms inside the center we gathered on the steps in front of the main building while Alon explained the importance of this center to Israeli society.

The Suzanne Dellal Center for Dance and Theater was established in 1989 by the family of Jack Dellal, a very wealthy British property investor whose parents were Iraqi-born Sephardic Jews. The center was named in honor of one of his daughters who died at a young age. Its construction was part of the major renovation of the Neve Tzedek neighborhood that began in the late 1980s. Since then, the center has grown into a multi-level campus consisting of four different performance halls, various rehearsal studios and several wide, open plazas used to host outdoor events. There is also a restaurant and small café within the complex. The stated purpose of the center is to cultivate, support and promote the art of contemporary dance in Israel, something it has done remarkably well; in 2010, it

was awarded the Israel Prize, the country's highest cultural award. The location of the Suzanne Dellal Center is also historically important, Alon told us. The area was once an educational compound containing the Yechiely Girls School and the Alliance School for Boys (both from 1908), the first schools built outside of Jaffa by Jewish settlers. In 1913, the city's first teaching seminary, the Seminar Lewinsky, was opened nearby, as well. Reconstructed sections of these former schools were included within the architectural design of the current center.

Alon went on to explain the important role these early schools played in the development of a national identity for Israeli society. Hebrew has been around since at least the 10th century BC. Many Jews, he told us, from the 6th century BC until the Middle Ages actually spoke Aramaic, a related semitic language used in the Southern Levant. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70AD, ending the Second Temple Period, the Hebrew language developed into Mishnaic Hebrew, the language of the Talmudic texts. As the Jewish Diaspora continued, and Jews found themselves scattered around Africa, Europe and the Middle East, Hebrew became more of a literary language, mostly kept alive through Rabbinical literature and its use in Judaic prayer. During the Middle Ages, Hebrew flourished briefly among secular high culture in Europe, and was also used as a sort of 'common language' allowing Jews from different countries to communicate with one another. But since the end of the Second Temple Period, Hebrew had not been used as a *native* language anywhere in the world until the end of the 1800s, when the language underwent an unprecedented revival.

The process began with the Zionist movement and the desire to return to the Land of Israel. Jews from divergent backgrounds began re-settling into Palestine, and a common language was needed for the purpose of communicating as one. In Eastern Europe, for example, Jewish communities spoke Yiddish (a West Germanic language historically spoken by Ashkenazi Jews) along with their country's native language. Hebrew was only used for liturgical purposes. But as more and more Jews from all over the world resettled into Palestine at the turn of the 20th century, it became incumbent upon these settlers to establish a common language, and not just for the purpose of communicating with each other, but also to create a *national* identity.

It's interesting to note that the revival of Hebrew actually developed on two separate fronts. The literary revival began to take shape in the late 1700s during the Enlightenment Period in Europe. Known as the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment), secular Jews felt that biblical Hebrew was worthy of fine literature, and the writing was transformed. The spoken revival didn't begin until

Jewish settlers began returning to Palestine in the late 19th century. By the beginning of the 1900s, though, both the literary and spoken revivals had converged, becoming the basis for the Hebrew language of today. Never in the history of the world had this type of revival occurred, where a natural (or sacred) language without *any* native speakers suddenly became the formal language of millions of *new* native speakers. These early Jewish schools in Palestine, according to Alon, paved the way for the formal teaching of what would become the modern Hebrew language.

From the Suzanne Dellal Center we walked further up Shabazi Street. Alon treated us to ice cream at Anita, a popular ice cream parlor in Tel Aviv. I noticed a bowl of water had been placed outside on the sidewalk in front of the shop, and I asked Alon about this because I had seen similar bowls in front of other businesses on my walk the previous day. He told me that Tel Aviv is a pet-friendly city, and some businesses do this for dog-owners, especially during the hot summer months. *Hmmm, very nice*. After our delicious ice cream break we continued walking for a few more blocks before making our way towards the corner of Ahad Ha'Am Street and Herzl Street to see the monumental statue of French Captain Alfred Dreyfus. The statue stands in a square near the French Institute along Rothschild Boulevard and is actually a copy of the one erected back in France during the 1980s.

Captain Dreyfuss was a French Jew. In 1895, it was discovered that sensitive military information had been given to the Germans. The high command unjustly accused Dreyfuss, the highest-ranking Jew in the French Military (who also happened to speak German) of the crime. He was convicted of high treason despite being innocent and sentenced to serve time in the notorious Devil's Island penal colony off of South America. It was later discovered that another officer committed the crime but this fact was covered up so as not to sully the French military. Known as the Dreyfuss Affair, the incident divided French society at the time, pitting antisemitic, pro-Catholic right-wingers against intellectual liberals. In 1906, Captain Dreyfuss was completely exonerated and reinstated into the military. The man's horrific ordeal was later championed as a success of the French democratic and legal system because in the end justice had seemingly prevailed despite the toxic political attitude surrounding the case. But many Jews in Europe thought otherwise. The Dreyfuss Affair had set off a wave of unprecedented antisemitism in Paris. The depth of this hatred alarmed the rising leaders of the Zionist movement who were convinced that Jews living in Europe would never be able to achieve full equality. So as terrible as the Dreyfuss incident was, it actually helped hasten the call for a return to Palestine for the purpose of establishing a Jewish homeland.

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On a street corner near the Captain Alfred Dreyfuss statue we boarded our bus and began driving north through the city along the beautiful Rothschild Boulevard, one of the most expensive and oldest streets in Tel Aviv. The boulevard was named in honor of Baron Edmond James de Rothschild, a French member of the wealthy Rothschild banking family who was an ardent Zionist supporter and provided funding for the movement in its critical early stages. Vehicular traffic is divided by a wide, tree-lined central strip containing pedestrian and bike lanes. Many beautiful homes grace this boulevard. Earlier, as we walked through the Neve Tzedek neighborhood, Alon spoke about the unique architecture of Tel Aviv. Driving back towards the center of the city we could see many examples of this architectural style along this prominent boulevard.

Tel Aviv, as it pertains to the areas outside of Jaffa, is essentially a new city that grew rather quickly during the first half of the 20th century. Many of these early buildings were designed by immigrant Jewish architects from Europe, a large number hailing from Germany where a new movement in architecture called the Bauhaus style (also known as the International Modern style) had become popular during the 1920s and 30s. Influenced by the avant-garde movement sweeping through Europe at the time, Bauhaus architecture blended simplicity and functionality with an aim to unify art and technology, a futuristic concept considered highly appropriate to the socialist ideals of Zionism.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, thousands of these Bauhaus style buildings were built throughout Tel Aviv, and a good portion of them still exist today, especially on Rothschild Boulevard. Some of the characteristics of Bauhaus architecture include asymmetrical facades with windows running horizontally like ribbons. Each had a sole vertical element provided by an internal staircase designed in a ladder-like arrangement of windows. Many of the buildings feature round windows similar to maritime portholes (inspired by the superstructure of the ships that brought the Jewish immigrants to Palestine). Initially, Bauhaus buildings were completely rectilinear, but later on Jewish architects began introducing rounded or curved elements into the structures.

The differences between Bauhaus buildings in Europe and those of Tel Aviv were due to climate considerations. The hot Mediterranean weather necessitated some adaptation to the essential Bauhaus style. The usually larger glass windows of Europe, designed to let in light, were replaced by smaller windows meant to limit the heat of the day and keep the structures cooler. Long narrow balconies were added, each shaded by the balcony above it. The pitched roof of European structures was normally replaced with flat ones, providing a common social area where residents could gather in the evening. The larger Bauhaus buildings in Tel Aviv were built on pillars that allowed wind to blow under and cool the apartments. The vast majority of these structures were painted white to reflect the sun's rays. Today, many of the original Bauhaus buildings have been restored or renovated and are collectively referred to as *The White City*. In 2003, Tel Aviv's Bauhaus legacy earned it a spot on the UNESCO World's Heritage List.

As we approached the end of Rothschild Boulevard we could see a steady stream of demonstrators walking down the center pedestrian lane carrying Israeli flags. A large rally protesting the government's judicial overhaul had just concluded on Eliezer Kaplan Street a few blocks to the east and the crowds were disbursing and going home. We reached the end of Rothschild Boulevard and turned onto Huberman Street, passing one side of Habima Square. The square is located in the center of the city, between its two most popular streets – Rothschild and Dizengoff – and serves as a cultural center, its wide plaza surrounded by a several institutions: the Habima Theater (the national theater of Israel), the Culture Palace (*Hechal Hatarbut*) home to the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Eyal Ofer Pavilion of Contemporary Arts. The square also contains a beautiful two-level garden known as the Yaakov Garden, which offers blooming flowers in season and several ancient Ficus trees.

From Habima Square we drove east on Eliezer Kaplan Street, eventually turning onto Ayalon Highway (Route 20) and heading south out of the city. We drove for about 30 minutes along the highway to the city of Rehovot, located roughly 20 kilometers south of Tel Aviv, to visit the Ayalon Institute. Rehovot is part of the Central District, one of the six administrative districts of Israel. It was founded in 1890 by Jewish pioneers who arrived at what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine during the *First Aliyah*, the first wave of Jewish immigrants from 1881 to 1903. Many of them were from Eastern Europe, fleeing pogroms and persecution in their countries. These early pioneers established in Rehovot an agricultural settlement called a *moshava*, which was different from a kibbutz in that the farm plots were owned individually. After the second wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the early part of the 20th century, the newer settlers formed

agricultural communities called kibbutzim and moshavim, which were administered as farm collectives (and still are, I would imagine).

We arrived at the Ayalon Institute in the northern part of Rehovot around 3:00pm. I really enjoyed this visit and was unaware of this particular part of Israeli history. Our local guide from the institute was a woman named Marina who led us through the area and explained to us the fascinating story behind this historic site. What follows is a brief description of what she told us:

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, the League of Nations authorized Great Britian to administer the lands of Palestine and the Transjordan area, known as the British Mandate, until such time as the territories could become independent. From 1920 until 1948, the British carried out this role. The British Mandate also required the implementation of the Balfour Declaration made by the British in 1917 calling for a "national home for the Jewish people" alongside the Palestinian Arabs. This was a hot point of contention for Palestinian Arabs who did not look favorably to wave after wave of Jewish immigrants coming into their territories and establishing settlements in what was an overwhelmingly Arab region. Palestinian Arabs also did not like the idea of the British, or any other foreign power for that matter, ruling over them. This led to many riots, revolts and uprisings against the British and between Jewish settlers and Palestinian Arabs. Both camps quickly formed independence movements. For nearly three decades the British had their hands full (and, I imagine, were grateful to finally get the hell out of there when they did).

During the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, Palestinian Arabs rose up against British rule and were met by a brutal suppression. Under the Palestine Mandate, new Jewish settlements were prohibited, but during the period of this Arab Revolt the British gave their tacit approval (or, at the very least, looked the other way) when Jewish settlers built what were called Tower and Stockade reinforcements and settlements to protect themselves from Arab attacks. Using an outdated Turkish Ottoman law still in use in Mandatory Palestine, which stated that an illegal building could not be torn down once the roof has been built, the Jewish settlers (between 1936 and 1939) quickly established 57 new settlements (including 52 kibbutzim) all across the territory before the British clamped down. These new settlements were raised quickly, many within a day, with perimeter defensive walls made of pre-fabricated wooden molds. In the center was a tall wooden observation tower and reinforced sheds to protect the inhabitants. Basically, they were fortified agricultural settlements where Jewish settlers could take refuge against Arab attacks. The operation was run by the Haganah (the main Zionist paramilitary

organization in Mandatory Palestine) with the cooperation of all the Jewish settlements in the region. Alayon, which is now the Alayon Institute, was one of these Tower and Stockade settlements. It was constructed on January 1, 1939 on top of a mound called Kibbutz Hill. But this would be no ordinary kibbutz.

By the 1930s, Zionist leaders in Mandatory Palestine knew they would need to fight to create a Jewish state, and that meant establishing a steady supply of weapons into Palestine through smuggling and clandestine arms factories. Weapons such as the Sten machine gun, the weapon of choice of the *Palmach* (the elite fighting force of the Haganah), were easy enough to manufacture and smuggle into Mandatory Palestine. The problem was the 9mm ammunition for these weapons, which was hard to come by. Towards the end of the 1930s, especially after the Arab revolt, the British closely monitored everything going in and out of Mandatory Palestine. If the Haganah wanted bullets for their weapons they would have to produce them inside the territories somehow without the British finding out. Making or smuggling weapons in Mandatory Palestine (by either Arabs or Jews) was a capital offense and could result in a death sentence. The Haganah decided to build a clandestine cartridge factory beneath the Alayon settlement. The site of the settlement was chosen because it was on a hill, and the space below it could easily be turned into an underground assembly line. In 1938, machines for cutting, drilling and punching brass metal into bullet cartridges were purchased in Poland. The machinery had to be secretly stowed away in Bierut, Lebanon (which was controlled by the French) for four years before it was eventually smuggled into Mandatory Palestine via train with the help of Jews serving in the British army.

The beauty of this operation was in its planning. Once the Ayalon settlement was constructed in 1939, this kibbutz – with the consent of the unsuspecting British who had a military camp nearby – became a training site for Jewish pioneers to teach them how to live on a kibbutz. There were constant groups of new settlers coming and going, which didn't raise any suspicions or concerns. It took only three weeks to hollow out a space beneath the hill where the kibbutz stood. Working clandestinely, a 300 square yard factory was constructed 13 feet underground, supported by two-foot thick concrete walls. Above this factory, the Haganah erected the kind of buildings normally seen in a kibbutz like a dining hall, a community room, a childcare center and so forth. And directly above the clandestine cartridge factory they built a bakery and a laundry. The large automated industrial washing machines of the laundry room helped to mask the noise of the heavy machinery below. In fact, one of the kibbutz' main sources of income was washing the clothes of British soldiers and the other Jewish settlements in the area, so the laundry room was constantly humming. Another

thing concealing the noise emanating from the heavy machinery was a particularly busy train station located close to the kibbutz.

To keep the workers safe, the vents of the bakery provided a ventilation system for the factory below while gases and exhaust fumes were eliminated via the laundry room's technical system. The smells produced by the production of cartridges was hidden by the odors usually associated with a large laundry service. The entrances into the underground factory were just as clever. The largest one was concealed underneath the oven in the bakery weighing several tons (that slid open by a hidden cable system), the other entrance was located beneath one of the industrial drying machines in the laundry room. And how did they get electricity to run the factory? They simply hooked up a hidden line to the electrical system of the nearby train station.

The workers were a group of 45 young pioneers who were recruited by the Haganah. In order to maintain total secrecy, only the brave young men and women who worked in the factory knew about its existence, the rest of the kibbutz was completely oblivious to the operation. The ammo factory operated for three years, between 1945 until the formation of the State of Israel in 1948. During that time, it produced roughly 2.25 million 9mm cartridges, at a steady clip of approximately 40,000 per day, that were then smuggled to Haganah for distribution to its fighters. According to our guide Marina, the existence of the factory was only made public in 1973. Today, the kibbutz is preserved as an official Israel Heritage Site called the Ayalon Institute.

We began our tour of the former kibbutz inside the laundry room. Marina showed us the hidden entrance into the factory below, concealed underneath a large cylindrical drying machine that slid to one side revealing a ladder that descended into the underground chamber. Along the walls of the laundry room were photographs from the 1940s of the actual workers who participated in the operation. From here we walked through a courtyard filled with linen sheets hanging on clothes lines (for effect) and entered the bakery. When the Ayalon Kibbutz was converted into a museum, a staircase was added to the secret entranceway underneath the massive oven to accommodate visitors. We climbed down the spiral metal staircase to the actual ammo factory. I thought I was going to feel claustrophobic down there but the space was actually big enough not to be confining. All of the heavy machinery was lined up along one side of the wall in the main factory area. Mannequins dressed like the original workers were standing before some of the equipment. I'm not sure exactly how the process of making bullet cartridges works, but it appeared like an assembly line where brass plates

were cut and pressed and then passed down the line where other workers did whatever they did to make the final product. At the end of this assembly line someone would inspect the cartridges for quality control. The walls, like the ones in the laundry room, had photographs of the actual workers making bullets.

Some of the machinery is still functional. Marina turned one of them on so we could hear how loud it was. Believe me, it was pretty noisy. The Haganah was wise to build this factory underground and next to an active train station. In the chamber next to the factory was a firing range for the purpose of randomly testing cartridges for precision and accuracy. The next chamber was a storage facility for the bullets, which is now used as a conference or lecture room. We actually sat on wooden crates used to store the cartridges as Marina continued telling us about the kibbutz. When the operation first started, she told us, the kibbutz produced dairy as part of their business. Initially, the cartridges were smuggled out of the kibbutz in the false bottom of milk cans. But this manner severely limited the number of bullets they could distribute, so they eventually transported their cartridges via a fuel truck that arrived on a regular basis; the driver a member of Haganah, I believe. In order to acquire brass for the cartridges, the women in the kibbutz started a lipstick enterprise and convinced the British they needed the brass for the lipstick casings.

The conditions under which the young workers toiled was pretty tough. Although the air was filtered in and out, there was no air conditioning and during the hot summer months the temperatures would rise to very uncomfortable levels. In fact, many of the photos lining the wall showed the workers in T-shirts and shorts, including the women. If the temperature within the factory exceeded 40°C (104°F) they would shut down production for fear of igniting the gun powder. The workers were given special food consideration to make up for their lack of vitamin D from being below ground all day, and sunlamps were installed so they wouldn't appear pale and draw attention from British soldiers or other members of the kibbutz. When they finished their shift (they worked in two shifts) the workers had to make sure they didn't have any brass shavings or gun powder on their bodies or clothing. They would take their lunch in the dining hall with the other members of the kibbutz in groups, pretending to be coming in from the fields so nobody would suspect anything. When she was done, Marina fielded some questions from us before we left. I have to say, this was a *very* interesting stop and I'm so glad it was included on the tour. I highly recommend it.

We wrapped up our visit to the Ayalon Institute around 4:30pm and headed back to Tel Aviv. Along the way I noticed some impressive skyscrapers off the

highway just east of the city. One of the things I enjoyed about Tel Aviv was its fascinating mix of old and new architecture standing side by side. Although I was only in the city for two days, I thought it was quite lovely. I just hope it remains so, what with all the conflict currently going on over there. We reached our hotel by 5:30pm. Dinner was on our own that evening. I was pretty tired from a whole day of sightseeing – not to mention the lingering jet lag – and wasn't sure if I wanted to venture out anymore. *Old age is a bitch, folks*. A little later, Marti called my room and asked if I wanted to join her for dinner. Like me, she was traveling solo.

We met in the lobby around 7:30pm and walked several blocks to a place called Java Restaurant, an outdoor café on the corner of Ben Yehuda Street and Zeev Jabotinsky Street that someone in our group recommended. The food was okay, nothing special, so I don't remember what we had. Our conversation more than made up for the meal, though. We're both from Florida, and, for that matter, don't live that far from one another. We talked about life back home and our families. Marti has owned horses most of her adult life and she showed me pictures of them while we ate. It was a very pleasant evening. We got back to the hotel by 9:30pm and sat in the patio area in front of the sidewalk and continued to chat away for another hour until Susie and David appeared. They had just finished having dinner with some relatives who lived in Tel Aviv. At this point we called it a night. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Day Four

I woke up just after 5:00am and immediately made some coffee and wrote in my journal for about an hour before shaving and showering. While watching the BBC international news broadcast I dressed and repacked my luggage, placing it in the hallway for the porter. At 7:30am I proceeded to the lobby for breakfast. Forty-five minutes later we were on the bus heading out of the city. Our first stop that day was a visit to the ancient ruins of Caesarea National Park located along the Mediterranean coastline roughly 34 miles (55km) north of Tel Aviv. We traveled on Highway 2, also known as the Coastal Highway (or *Kvish HaHof*), which starts out as an arterial road in Tel Aviv and then becomes a freeway just north of the city, reaching as far as Haifa.

On our way out of Tel Aviv we passed Yarkon Park, a large urban park named after the Yarkon River which flows through it and empties out into the Mediterranean Sea near the Tel Aviv Port. By the 1920s, the Yarkon River served as the natural boundary of the city and both Palestinian Arabs and Jewish farmers grew vegetables and orchards along its banks. As Tel Aviv expanded northward, a park was planned on the southern banks of the river with the first trees being planted in the early 1940s. Slowly, the park grew eastward to eventually encompass 865 acres (or 3.5 sq km), slightly larger than New York City's Central Park. The original idea behind this green space was to accommodate the large influx of Jewish settlers from Europe who were not accustomed to the arid conditions of the region, and to create a more verdant landscape reminiscent of biblical times. Today, this very popular park – sixteen million visitors annually – offers six different gardens, historical sites, lakes, an aviary, a water park, two outdoor concert venues and sports facilities.

As we continued north along Highway 2 out of Tel Aviv we passed several suburban communities with newer apartment buildings. According to Alon, due to the high cost of living in Tel Aviv, more and more workers are choosing to reside in these towns on the outskirts of the city and commute. Alon also spoke about the country's ethnic and religious make up. Currently, the population consists of 75 percent Jews, 20 percent Arabs (both Muslim and Christian) and 5 percent 'other' (which includes various non-Arab Christians and other religious denominations). He told us that many people might think of Israel as a religious state, but in reality there are many non-secular Jews and Arabs living in Israel. Ultra-Orthodox Jews (those who strictly observe Jewish religious law) consists of 12-14 percent of the total population. They are the fastest growing demographic group in the country. And they present a unique conundrum for the nation, he said.

Ever since the formation of the State of Israel, Orthodox Jews have been exempted from military service. All other Jews are required to serve a mandatory conscription period: men serve 32 months and women serve 24 months, plus reserve duty. A growing divide between these Orthodox Jewish groups and the average Israeli has been emerging for years. In 2017, the country's Supreme Court ruled against the military draft exemptions but political maneuvering between the right-wing parties have created legislative workarounds that have kept the exemptions in place. In March of 2024 (last month as of this writing), those legislative acts were due to expire and there has been a very loud and growing demand by regular Israelis that military exemption for Orthodox Jews be terminated so they can serve like everyone else. This is going to be a huge problem for Israel going forward because on March 9, 2024, one of Israel's two chief

rabbis, Yosef Yitzhak, bluntly declared that if Orthodox Jews are forced to go into the army, they will simply move abroad. Normally, ultra-Orthodox resistance to national conscription is nothing new, but this forceful declaration by such a respected rabbi, especially during the midst of the Hamas-Israeli War, is concerning for the country because it transcends political debate and opens up fundamental questions about the cohesion of Israeli society.

This divide stems from the fact that Orthodox Jews have struggled with the concept of a Jewish state since before its inception. For centuries they believed in returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the Temple but only following the return of the Messiah. Any other kind of sovereign Jewish state, they believed, would be blasphemy. On the other hand, Zionism, the return to the Southern Levant and the establishment of a Jewish homeland, was a political movement born from the continuing discriminations and persecutions Jewish people have endured the world over. After World War II, and the murder of so many observant Jews in Eastern Europe, groups of Orthodox Jews sought refuge in the new State of Israel. Eventually, two camps of Orthodox Jews emerged within Israel. On one hand, today's national religious Israelis support the notion of Zionism because they think it will hasten the arrival of the messianic age. This group actually supports army service. In the other camp are the Haredim, the ultra-Orthodox Jews who do not believe in Zionism and only live there because it is the Holy Land and the government subsidizes their studies. This group is vehemently opposed to army service. And for the record, there are some Haredi Jews who voluntarily enlist in the military although they have no obligation to do so (and many more have enlisted since the start of the Hamas-Israeli War, I read).

The rapid growth of the Orthodox Jewish community in Israel will present a real challenge to the state. On average, the typical Orthodox woman has 5-6 children as compared with only 2.5 for other Israeli Jewish women. Netanyahu's government depends on a coalition of right-wing and conservative religious parties to exist, and with 1 in 4 children now being raised in an ultra-Orthodox family the political base of this group can only expand. If this trend were to continue, Israel might become a different country altogether. Haredi Jews pay very little taxes yet receive a large bulk of state subsidies. They are not largely employed, focusing instead on their religious studies full time. This would not bode well for either the future of Israel's military or its economy. When asked about this, Chief Rabbi Yitzhak responded this would never happen because the Haredim believe the reason Israel's military (or economy) is so successful is because of the prayers and studies of religious Jews. Hmmmm, I wonder how someone grows such a

sanctimonious pair of balls? I guess by his logic, nobody was praying for the Jews in Europe during the Holocaust.

Alon also touched upon some of the differences between American and Israeli societies. In Israel, gas, housing and automobiles tend to be more expensive due to the limited availably of land and the importation of many products that cannot be produced in the country. But things like health care and education are much cheaper. Alon's entire college costs were around $9,000, a fraction of what American students pay for a college degree. He made a very good follow-up point concerning education. He said he didn't understand the notion of an American student going into a university straight out of high school. To explain it better he asked a rhetorical question: "How does an 18-year old determine his or her proper life's path at such an early age?" By comparison, the average Israeli has to serve in the military starting at age 18. In his case, as an Israeli male, he served 32 months. Many Israelis just out of military service tend to travel and explore (you know, live a little, sow your wild oats, gain some life experiences, and so forth). He didn't start college until he was in his mid-20s, the age most Americans are usually done studying and beginning their careers.

And I agree with him. When I was 18 – young and immature – I studied liberal arts at Rutgers University because, quite frankly, I didn't have a clue as to what I really wanted to do with my life. The end result? I became a highly educated letter carrier. Definitely not what I envisioned when I started college (despite the fact I loved being a mailman and was able to make a good living from it). And I know friends and family members who pursued what they thought were their life's passion at an early age only to end up hating their careers. So there is something to be said about waiting and gaining some maturity – and adult life experiences – before plunging into four, six or eight years of higher education.

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We entered the city of Caesarea around 9:00am, passing the Caesarea Golf Course in the process, the only full-size golf course in the country. Caesarea is a very affluent coastal town with a population of about 6,000 inhabitants. It is the only Israeli locality administered by a private non-profit firm, the Caesarea Development Corporation, which was started in 1952 by the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation. This is a *very* exclusive neighborhood, home to some of Israel's most notable citizens, including Prime Minister Netanyahu. On the fringes

of Caesarea is a well-planned Industrial Park home to over 200 of Israel's biggest companies – ranging in fields such as high tech businesses, biotechnologies and medicine, as well as energy, water and environmental industries – employing over 12,000 skilled workers. Caesarea is situated halfway between Tel Aviv in the south and Haifa in the north. Many of the residents commute to one of those two cities to work. Our purpose for visiting the town was to see the ancient ruins located within Caesarea National Park along its shoreline. The single, two-lane road that enters the park was already congested, even at that early hour, attesting to the popularity of the site. We parked just outside the partially rebuilt Roman theater and Alon led us on a one-hour walking tour of the ruins.

Caesarea, also referred to as *Caesarea Maritima* or *Caesarea Palaestinae*, was an ancient port and administrative city of Palestine. It was originally a Phoenician settlement that underwent a massive overhaul between 22-10 BC by Herod the Great, the king of Judea under the Romans. King Herod named the city after his Roman patron, the emperor Caesar Augustus. In the year 6 AD, Caesarea became the capital of the Roman province of Judea and would serve as an important seaport for the central Palestine region known formerly as ancient Samaria. The city had seen the rise and fall of many empires and had adapted accordingly, from Roman structures to Crusader castles, before being decimated by the forces of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1265. By 1948, Caesarea was nothing more than a small fishing village known as *Qisarya*, its Arab inhabitants fleeing during the fighting leading up to the formation of the State of Israel. During the 1950s and 60s, the land beneath the deserted village was excavated for archeological purposes, revealing the ruins of this once great seaport city.

King Herod was born around 72 BC in the ancient kingdom of Edom (in what is now part of Jordan). Although Herod's family was actually Arab on both sides they converted to Judaism at one point (probably out of political necessity). His meteoric rise was due to his father's good report with Julius Caesar, the Roman general and dictator, who entrusted his father with the public affairs of Judea. In his late twenties, Herod was appointed the governor of Galilee. He would later be appointed military general of Samaria and a part of what is now Syria, clamping down so harshly that he was condemned by the *Sanhedrin*, a rabbinical court that formed the legislative and judicial assembly of Judea. Around 40 BC, the ruler of Judea, Hyrcanus II, was overthrown by his nephew, forcing Herod to flee to Rome where he pleaded for help to return Hyrcanus II to power. Unexpectedly, the Roman Senate made Herod the *new* king and he returned to the region with an army and established his control over the region. In order to cement his royal ties to the throne, he married the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, banishing his first wife

and child. In fact, King Herod has been described as a cruel and calculating monarch who didn't hesitate to sacrifice his own family members whenever it suited his ambitions or he felt his power base threatened. Case in point, he would later have his second wife (the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II) killed.

Throughout his reign there seemed to be a certain level of distrust between Herod and the Jews he ruled over, who may have questioned his religious commitment being that his family were converted Jews. Ever the suspicious tyrant, it is believed he had a private army of 2,000 bodyguards. They acted as a sort of secret police, spying on the public and keeping dissenters in line. And with the support of Rome behind him he ruled Judea with an iron-fist. Starting around 19 BC, King Herod embarked on numerous colossal building projects that would immortalize him in history, including the construction of Caesarea and the rebuilding of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, to name a few. In Christianity, King Herod is noted for being the king of Judea when Jesus was crucified. I will be mentioning King Herod many times throughout this journal.

Since the 1950s, ongoing excavations at Caesarea have revealed many structures from its long history, and slowly this ancient city is being resurrected as a historical tourism site. From the Roman period there are ruins of a large open theater; a temple dedicated to the goddess Roma and Emperor Augustus; a hippodrome once used for chariot races and gladiator sports; a double aqueduct system that channeled spring water from the foot of Mt. Carmel into the city; a section of a boundary or defensive wall; and the remains of a moat protecting the harbor's southern and western edges. Throughout Caesarea National Park are also excavated ruins of a Byzantine church and a Crusader fortress from later periods in its history, among other interesting historical remnants. We began our tour of the site inside the large Roman theater, which has been mostly rebuilt. Only the front rows of seats, the orchestra, parts of the stage and a section of the backstage ornamental wall (known as a *scena-frons*) remain from the original theater. Today, a modern stage has been erected where musical performances are conducted.

We sat along the bottom rows of the theater while Alon gave us some information on how the Romans viewed and governed their outlying provinces. As opposed to the ancient Greeks, who introduced classical culture (plays, philosophy, etc.) to the places they conquered, the Romans were actually cruder, less sophisticated. Romans, he told us, believed it was their destiny to *rule*. They were not necessarily opposed to the cultures they conquered as long as everyone submitted to Roman rule. Despite their war-like tendencies, the Romans permitted their provinces (or colonies) to live in peace and prosper as long as everyone towed

the line and paid their taxes or tributes. If not, they would be met by the force of the mighty Roman legions. Their forms of entertainment were not as sophisticated as the Greeks. Roman theater was often violent, crude, with nudity and slapstick comedy; they introduced chariot races and gladiator sports that included violence to both people and animals. One such practice, he told us, was the feeding of Christians to hungry lions, an example of the kind of cruelty the Romans considered 'public entertainment', which also served as a warning to lawbreakers and dissenters. Incidentally, according to Alon, the killing of Christians inadvertently allowed the public to see these people as martyrs for their religious beliefs, allowing for sympathy, curiosity and eventually more followers to their cause.

We made our way through an open field scattered with ancient pillars, friezes and partially rebuilt sections of other structures just behind the ornamental wall. Information boards posted throughout this area explained how the stones used to build Caesarea were brought here from all over the Mediterranean, from the famous quarries of Greece, Turkey (Asia Minor) and Egypt, denoting the wealth and status of the city. We saw an area with sarcophagi (stone coffins) as we walked towards the shoreline and stopped to see a replica of a stone monument dedicated to Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect who presided over the trail of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the first mention of Pilate ever found that can be accurately dated to his lifetime (the original stone monument is on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem). We continued to the shore's edge to view the ruins of King Herod's palace located right along the waterline, passing a reconstructed stone well in the process. A large swimming pool with decorative mosaic flooring has been unearthed at the palace that extends almost to the shoreline. Without any walls containing it, it gave me the impression of an ancient 'infinity pool'.

We made our way towards the hippodrome, crossing a portion of the Herodian Wall. We came upon an area with ancient public toilets, some of us posing for pictures while sitting on the stone 'thrones'. Alon explained that a narrow water canal built beneath the toilets would continuously flush human waste away, while sticks fastened with some kind of soft scrubbing material was used in lieu of toilet paper. We proceeded to the hippodrome, an open, oval-shaped arena where chariot races and gladiator events were held. The hippodrome could accommodate up to 20,000 spectators. Every few years Caesarea hosted special races and gladiator events that drew large crowds from the surrounding areas, according to Alon. Just to the east of the hippodrome were the ruins of the medieval Crusader citadel and its walls, built within the man-made harbor that King Herod constructed hundreds of years earlier. We returned to the bus and drove to view a section of the

remarkably well preserved Roman aqueduct system situated on the ancient city's northern rim. From here we exited Caesarea National Park (the traffic in and out of the site had gotten worse, it took us nearly 30 minutes to reach Highway 2 again).

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Our next stop was a visit to the Atlit Detention Camp Museum located in the town of Atlit about 12 miles (20 km) south of Haifa. On our drive we passed Jisr az-Zarqa, the only Arab-majority town located along Israel's coastline. Alon told us the population is mostly descended from a Bedouin tribe dating back to the late 1800s. When Highway 2 was originally built there was no exit ramp for Jisr az-Zarqa. In fact, the town is pretty much hemmed in on all sides, preventing its expansion. Roughly 80 percent of its inhabitants live below the poverty line, with many males working as laborers doing menial jobs in Tel Aviv or Haifa earning around half the national wage average. I wondered if this was the same situation in other predominately Israeli-Arab towns.

We continued heading north along Highway 2 for almost 30 minutes before arriving at the site. Like our visit to the Ayalon Institute the day before, the Atlit Detention Camp Museum gave us another glimpse into the events unfolding in Palestine prior to Israel's independence. When we arrived one of the museum guides took us on a tour of the site, which is basically a well-preserved internment camp complete with barracks enclosed by perimeter fencing and guard towers. A bronze 3D map of what the facility looked like back in the 1940s is on display where you begin the tour. I'm not sure how many detainees this site was able to accommodate, but the map revealed at least five dozen large barracks. As we made our way through the museum portion of the camp, our guide enlightened us on the purpose and history of the site.

Initially, the Atlit Detention Camp was built by the British in the 1930s to hold both Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine who were placed under administrative detention for any number of offenses. But it would eventually detain mostly Jewish immigrants who had entered the area illegally from abroad. By the outbreak of World War II the situation in Mandatory Palestine was very tense. Clashes between Arabs and newly arriving Jewish settlers and the British authorities were common occurrences. The British tried to stem this situation by barring Jewish immigrants from entering Palestine who did not possess official entry permits. The camp was widely used to arrest and detain these illegal immigrants until they could be deported (or, in some cases, assimilated legally). But as the depths of the Nazi

atrocities against Jews in eastern Europe continued to unfold, more and more waves of desperate Jews left Europe (mostly by boat) and headed to Palestine. Eventually, tens of thousands of Jews would be intercepted by the British navy and military and be interned inside the Atlit Detention Camp.

Following the end of WWII, even larger groups of Jewish immigrants, many of them holocaust survivors from refugee camps in Europe, began streaming into Mandatory Palestine. As the situation turned in favor of the Jewish settlers, the camp ceased to be used as a detention center for illegal immigrants and during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (leading to the formation of the State of Israel) the site was used as a prisoner of war camp and as a detention center for local Arabs. It is interesting to note that during the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel used the camp to hold captured POWs from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. In 1987, Israel declared the camp a National Heritage Site. Today, several of the buildings have been preserved as a museum; clothing and other items donated by former detainees are used to give one of the barracks the same look it had back in 1945.

We began our tour of the site by visiting what was described as a disinfection center for the purpose of cleansing newly arrived illegal immigrants. Men and women were separated and forced to remove their clothing. They were sprayed with DDT, a chemical insecticide that is now largely banned in the West because of its adverse health and environmental impact. The detainees then entered showers and had their clothes disinfected and washed before they were assigned to one of the barracks. The original machines used to clean and disinfect the detainees' clothing are still on display. From here we moved to a shower area that included a walk-in disinfection pool. Along the walls were black and white photographs of the detainees at the camp taken from the 1940s. One can only imagine what a Jewish detainee, a survivor of the Holocaust in Europe, must have been thinking during this entire process. Granted, the people kept at the Atlit Detention Camp were not tortured, starved and slaughtered like back in Europe, but going from one form of concentration camp to another must have been very disconcerting, to say the least.

From the disinfection center we headed over to one of the barracks used to house the detainees. The inside of this structure has been historically preserved and looks as it did back when the facility was open. I counted just over two dozen cots lined up along the walls opposite each other. The wooden walls had sections with carvings made by Jewish detainees who inscribed their names and places of origin in the hopes of connecting with loved ones separated by the horrors of the Holocaust. According to our guide, the average detainee spent about a year at the

camp before being relocated, although some were interned longer. Behind the barracks we walked across a field containing a donated C-46 Commando military transport plane that was used to bring 150 Jews into Mandatory Palestine from Iraq and Italy in 1947. Inside a converted sea vessel called the *Galina*, an interactive museum has been created to show how the majority of the illegal Jewish immigrants entered Palestine. Most Jews during and after WWII came to the area stashed away in boats, sometimes forming flotillas. Many were intercepted by the British navy. We saw an interesting film aboard the *Galina* that re-creates the precarious sea journey of these immigrants, how they had to hide within the hull of these ships and at times suffer attacks by British planes and naval ships patrolling off the coast of Palestine.

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We concluded our tour of the Atlit Detention Camp Museum around 12:30pm and then headed east on Highway 721 through Mt. Carmel National Park to visit Isfiya (also known as Usfiya), a Druze-majority village with a population of about 12,000 inhabitants located on Mt. Carmel. We were scheduled to have lunch with a Druze family to learn more about the Druze people, their history and religion, from a local spokesperson and guide.

Mt Carmel National Park is the largest national park in Israel. Situated in the northern part of the country, the park extends over most of the Mt Carmel mountain range. As we ascended the mountain, we saw hillsides and valleys interspersed with forests of pine, cypress and eucalyptus trees. The park has been recognized as a biosphere reserve by UNESCO since 1996, forming a typical Mediterranean ecosystem. In addition to its geological phenomena and rich biodiversity, Mt Carmel also contains over 250 archeological sites of prehistoric human habitation, including evidence of ancient settlements found in caves along its hillsides. Alon told us the park has a number of popular biking and walking trails.

During the first half of the 16th century, Druze began emigrating to Mt Carmel from Lebanon, leaving their mark on the landscape as they cleared forests to make room for farming. Intense logging on Mt Carmel continued throughout the time of the Ottomans until it was eventually banned by the British during the Palestine Mandate period. Proposals were put forth to create some kind of nature reserve on the mountain range. But after the formation of the State of Israel the fledgling nation needed its precious green space to accommodate the waves of immigrants

coming into the country, and new land developments and settlements began encroaching upon the natural wonder of Mt Carmel. In 1963, the Israeli government passed a law that would establish and protect Mt Carmel and its other nature reserves.

We ascended Mt. Carmel along Highway 721 for about 25-30 minutes, meandering through rocky valleys and patches of forests, before reaching the village of Isfiya around 1:00pm. Druze first arrived in Isfiya around the beginning of the 17th century and initially made their living from olive oil, grapes and honey. During the Palestinian Arab revolt of the late 1930s, the local Druze population initially sided with their fellow Arabs until Muslim insurgents kidnapped and murdered some of their leaders. They quickly switched sides, helping the British to eliminate the insurgents from the area. They formed a Druze self-defense force that later coordinated with local Jewish forces, establishing close ties that have existed till this day.

There are approximately 1 million Druze worldwide, the vast majority of them live in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Although they view themselves as Arabs, they are not Muslim. The Druze religion does not believe in separatism, and advocates blending in and living in harmony with their neighbors. A fact that makes them loyal to the countries they live in, allowing them a certain sense of autonomy (but they *have* been persecuted as a minority group by certain Muslim regimes throughout their history). In Israel, for example, the Druze serve in the military and hold important positions in the government. There is a very strong bond (or kinship) between Druze communities worldwide. The Druze faith is a closed religion the way some trade unions are 'closed shops'. They do not attempt to proselytize outside of their own group; their numbers come solely from within. And if you think that sounds strange, wait till you hear about the religion itself. We were given an introduction after lunch by the local guide, and believe me, I hadn't heard anything this 'trippy' since I dropped acid back in college.

We drove through the village of Isfiya, a kind of sprawling town rising along the hillsides, and stopped on a street at the top of one such hill that offered a nice view of the valley (and the rest of the village) below. Our guide was a friendly, grey-haired man in his sixties who once lived in Hallendale, Florida. His English was very good. I had jotted the man's name in my notebook when we first arrived but was unable to decipher my own shorthand later on, so rather than guessing and possibly insulting the man I will simply refer to him as our guide. He led us from the main street through a series of narrow alleyways to a large home where we would be having lunch. The few locals we saw smiled but did not interact with us.

It was obvious from the deference the locals bestowed on our guide that he was someone important in the community. And it was also possible that he was one of the few people in the village who could speak English fluently. In front of the home we visited, the elderly female owner of the house sat next to a small outdoor grill equipped with a conveyor belt, warming pita bread for our lunch. Using her hands, she smeared a blend of olive oil and spices from a bowl over the round pieces of bread before inserting them into the grill.

Most of the homes in the area were built from stone, cement and/or wood and covered with painted stucco. The house we visited had a main living room that was quite large. Around the entire perimeter of the walls were end-to-end sofas, loveseats and armchairs. In the center was an open space covered by a beautiful, blue-patterned rug. According to our guide, this was a typical layout for a Druze family room. They prefer to sit facing each other (like in a circle). On the walls were photos and paintings of bearded religious men wearing white laffas, a fez wrapped with a white piece of cloth. In front of the chairs and sofas, small tables had been arranged which were now topped with trays of food that had been prepared for us by the home's owner. She kept bringing us freshly grilled pita bread as we ate. *Delicious*. Druze cuisine is similar to other Levantine cuisines. On the table where I sat was an enormous silver tray containing ten plates with various dishes: brown rice topped with shredded chicken; *dolma* (a stuffed dish made from rice and minced meat wrapped in grape or cabbages leaves), stuffed peppers, some sort of creamed cauliflower; *tabbouleh* (a traditional salad made from finely chopped parsley and tomatoes); a cabbage salad; *mujaddara* (a lentil dish); two types of minced meat dishes with different sauces; and plenty of freshly made hummus. It was quite a feast… *and* my first real authentic taste of the region's cuisine since I arrived. Lunch was a leisurely affair, we helped ourselves to as much as we wanted until we were full. They served some kind of dessert (I don't recall what it was) and coffee or tea afterward.

Following lunch we had a one hour Q & A session with the local guide concerning the Druze religion and way of life. The creation of the Druze faith, he told us, dates back to the early part of the 11th century AD when a Persian scholar and Ismaili mystic (a branch or sect of Shia Islam) named Hamza ibn Ali ibn Ahmad arrived in Egypt and began preaching a Unitarian, or *Muwahhidun*, doctrine. He quickly garnered supporters of this new faith or philosophy, including the Fatimid caliph, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, who later become a key figure in the Druze faith. What followed was a simplified (yet still convoluted) explanation of the faith itself, which sounded to me like a patchwork of belief systems that combined several key elements from other religions in a sort of "throw-it-against-

the-wall-and-see-if-it'll-stick" spiritual philosophy. And please don't get me wrong, I am not passing judgment on the Druze faith in particular…no, I tend to view *all* religions with the same skepticism and disbelief. But this one definitely had some additional head-scratching components to it. So here goes…

The *Epistles of Wisdom* (or the Book of Wisdoms) are a collection of pastoral letters and sacred texts that serve as the foundational and central text of the Druze faith, written by teachers of the faith who were native to the Levant region. The Epistles of Wisdom contain one hundred and eleven epistles, organized into six books, the earliest one dating back to the founding figure of the Druze faith, the 11th century Persian missionary, Hamza ibn Ali ibn Ahmad. Our guide told us the Epistles of Wisdom revolves around the acknowledgement and worship of al-Hakim bi-Amar Allah, the sixth Fatimid caliph of Egypt, who is regarded as the last and definitive incarnation of the true One God.

The Druze canon or scriptures are, for lack of a better word, a *smorgasbord* of texts and ideas stemming from the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Quran, and a *host* of other ancient religions and philosophies. The faith has been influenced not only by Christianity and Islam, but also by Gnosticism (a spiritual philosophy that formed in the 1st century AD), Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism (ancient and medieval Persian religions), and Ghandharan Buddhism (prevalent in northwestern India when the Druze faith was formed). The epistles also include philosophical musings related to Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and Pythagoras. The end purpose of all these syncretic teachings and philosophies, according to our guide, is to assert the Unity of God, the concept of reincarnation, and the eternity of the soul. And this, folks, was the extent of our introduction into the Druze faith, leaving me – not unlike the Epistles of Wisdom – in a constant state of *"wait, what?"*.

I had to go online later to learn more about the Druze faith. And let me tell you, even my online research failed to provide a definitive explanation of the religion beyond some general concepts. It is based on an esoteric interpretation of scripture, emphasizing the role of the mind and truthfulness and incorporating the notions of reincarnation and theophany (the act of encountering a deity that manifests itself in a tangible form). Druze believe at the end of their cycle of birth, after a series of reincarnations, that their soul will be reunited with the Cosmic Mind (or Consciousness). The Druze religion incorporates various aspects of mysticism, deep spiritual and religious beliefs, combined with ancient moral philosophies, forming what is arguably a tremendously confusing harbinger of a faith. And the Druze prefer it that way. They are very secretive about most of their religious

practices. In fact, Druze manuscripts were deliberately written in a style an outsider would find hard to understand, using ambiguous words, cryptic phrases, symbology and numerology, to prevent the texts from being misinterpreted.

And if anybody out there is thinking, '*Hey*, *this sounds just like the kind of ambiguity I'm looking for in a religion',* I hate to burst your bubble. Because you're 1,100 years late to this party. The 'membership book' was closed back in the 11th century, and it hasn't been opened since. Between the years 1017 and 1043, a period of Druze proselytization known as the Divine Call occurred in which people were allowed to join the Druze faith. The followers of the Druze religion today are mostly the descendants of those who took the pledge back then. In other words, they aren't looking for any new *outside* members.

After his discussion about the Druze faith, the guide spoke briefly about everyday life and customs in his community. It seemed, beyond the religion, they live the same sort of mundane existence one would find in any small town in America. The locals grow up, marry, have kids, worry about the future, the economy, their children's education, and so forth. The one thing that is frowned upon is marrying outside of their faith. The close-knit sense of community they share is based on their religious traditions, so marrying outside of their faith is taken as a serious affront and can lead to ostracism and even excommunication. Our guide fielded some questions from the group before we had to leave. I really enjoyed this stop. The meal was awesome and learning about this relatively obscure religion was very interesting to me.

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We left Isfiya around 3:00pm and drove down Mt Carmel heading north to the city of Haifa where we would be spending the night. Haifa is the third largest city in Israel with a population of about 300,000. Built on the northern slopes of Mt Carmel and around the Bay of Haifa, the city is a major seaport and industrial center in Israel. Its industrial area is located in the eastern part of the city around the Kishon River, which includes the Haifa oil refinery (one of two in the country), and there is also a large manufacturing and technology sector situated near the southern entrance of the city, which is home to many well-known international high tech companies. It is no coincidence these corporations have offices and

factories here. Two of the most respected academic institutions in Israel can be found in Haifa: the *University of Haifa* and the *Technion – Israel Institute of Technology*, a prestigious public research university founded during the early 1900s and now ranked among the top universities in the entire Middle East.

Haifa's location along the Mediterranean Coastal Plain made it an ideal land bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa. As a result, it was targeted for conquest many times. Every major civilization in the region dating back 3,000 years has had a hand in ruling Haifa at one time or another. As we approached from the highway, Alon pointed out the unique cityscape of Haifa. The city was built over three elevated tiers which were now clearly visible to us. The bottom level contains the Port of Haifa and the commercial and industrial sectors. The middle level is situated on the slopes of Mt Carmel and consists of the older residential neighborhoods. The top level has the newer, more expensive neighborhoods overlooking the city and bay area.

We drove into Haifa and proceeded to ascend to the top level for a panoramic view of the city. Alon spoke about the demographics of Haifa. Roughly 82 percent of the population is comprised of Israeli Jews who normally live in the higher elevated neighborhoods of the city, another 14 percent are Christians (primarily Christian Arabs), and the remaining four percent are a mix of Muslims, Druze and members of the Baha'i faith. According to Alon, most of the Christian Arabs live in the lowland areas near the seaport. Haifa has the second largest Christian Arab population in Israel. He said the Christian Arab population of Haifa tended to be better educated and wealthier than other Arab communities in the country, forming a liberal Arabic-speaking culture that thrives in the city.

We parked on top of a hill above the Baha'i Shrine and Gardens, looking down onto the city and the entire Haifa Bay. It was quite a view. But the scene stealer had to be the beautifully landscaped Baha'i Gardens complex, which extends the entire length of this long hill. In 2008, the shrine was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. About halfway down the garden is the spectacular golden-domed Baha'i Shrine, containing the tomb of the Bab (who died in the mid-1800s), a central figure in the Baha'i faith. Near this hill is the Seat of the Universal House of Justice (another beautiful building surrounded by 58 Corithian columns) that serves as the world headquarters for the Baha'i religion.

Alon spoke briefly about the Baha'i faith, a relative newcomer in the religious field whose all-encompassing tenets could give the Druze a run for their money. There are approximately 5-8 million members worldwide. In a nutshell, they

believe that all religions stem from a single God who introduced them to humanity via *Manifestations of God* (or prophets) like Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. God is too complex to understand, so prophets or messengers are periodically chosen to reveal and interpret God's will. The most recent prophet, according to them, was the founder of their faith, the son of a Persian aristocrat named Baha'u'llah, who died in 1892. His teachings form the three basic belief principals of the faith: namely, the unity of God, the unity of religion, and the unity of humanity. In this regard, the Baha'i faith considers all of the world's major religions as fundamentally unified in terms of purpose (the worship of the same God) but that each religion is divergent in their social practices, which can lead to confusion and exclusion. The Baha'i religion at its core teaches unity of all peoples and rejects notions of racism, sexism and nationalism. The goal is to create a unified world order to ensure prosperity for everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, creed or societal class.

But on closer inspection, the Baha'i faith, for all its inclusiveness, seems to cling to the same morality clauses that every other 'old time' religion embraces. If you're a person who isn't into the traditional family lifestyle and enjoys having sex outside of the boundaries of marriage, or, for that matter, your sexual orientation isn't heterosexual, or you like to imbibe alcohol on occasion, well, you'll feel about as welcomed in this faith as a fox in a henhouse. Again, I'm not trying to pass judgement here (*…ahhh, so what, maybe I am*) but for once I wish God would send a 'messenger' who doesn't end up sounding like a conservative Republican. Perhaps someone like Bernie Sanders, who, incidentally, would fit the bill since he's almost as old as Moses, anyway. *That* might be a religion I can wrap my head around. We can call it the *Sanderinians*. Okay, I'll stop being an asshole now.

An interesting point that Alon brought up while discussing the Baha'i faith was the emergence of so many new religions during the 19th century and early part of the 20th century. I hadn't really thought about it until he mentioned it. But there are quite a few of them. I actually looked them up for this journal: from the Baha'i faith to the Church of the Latter Day Saints to the Jehovah's Witnesses, and a slew of sects, cults and other religions I either vaguely, or *never*, heard of before. Alon said the changes caused by the Industrial Revolution during the 1800s upended traditional society, ushering in a new type of economy (away from an agriculturally bases one) and introduced new political ideologies like communism. And during changing times, especially unsettling ones, many humans try to make sense of it all by embracing religion or spirituality, he said. We can see it happening now in the Age of Technology and AI. Economies are being upended worldwide, migration is on the rise, right-wing political movements are taking

hold, and religious fanatics are pointing to the end of times. History is simply repeating itself. So I'm keeping my fingers crossed on the *Sanderinians...*

We spent about thirty minutes enjoying the view and taking photos of the city from this vantage point before reboarding our bus and heading to our hotel, the Golden Crown Haifa, located on Jaffa Road a few blocks from the port area. It was now 5:15pm. I relaxed in my room with a cup of instant coffee, writing down the day's events in my journal notebook. I was so full from lunch I didn't feel like eating dinner, which was on our own that evening, but I did want to explore the area around the hotel since we were just around the corner from the historic German Colony section of the city. I also wanted to take pictures of the Baha'i Gardens from the bottom of the hill looking up. My guidebook stated it was quite spectacular lit up at night.

At 6:00pm I grabbed my camera case and a bottle of water and headed out into the early night with a tourist map I obtained from the front desk. It was fast approaching sunset so I walked a few blocks north to get a view of the Haifa Port and Harbor before it got dark. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to see other than railroad tracks, link fences and container boxes. In fact, the area looked pretty deserted at that hour (and a little creepy if you're by yourself) so I turned around and headed towards the Baha'i Gardens along Ben Gurion Boulevard, walking through the German Colony neighborhood of Haifa.

In 1868, while the region was still under Ottoman control, a settlement was established in Haifa by the German Pietist Movement called the Christian German Templar Colony in Palestine, known simply as the German Colony. The movement developed in Germany in the 19th century, its followers were evangelicals who wanted to establish a perfect Christian community in the Holy Land in preparation for (or to hasten) the second coming of Christ, which they believed was imminent. They were granted permission by the Ottomans and purchased land in Haifa, which at the time was a backwater community of only 4,000 inhabitants. They would go on to create a few more colonies in Israel before being expelled in the 1940s under the suspicion of being Nazi supporters or collaborators. The Templars, as they called themselves, are actually credited with promoting the development of Haifa. With typical German ingenuity and drive, they built a very wide main street – the same Ben Gurion Boulevard I was walking on – stretching from the port area to the base of what is now the Baha'i Shrine and Gardens. Along this beautiful tree-lined street they built sturdy block-style homes made of stone with red-shingled roofs, many of which have been preserved and still exist today as functioning structures. Alon pointed out several of them to us as we drove through the city earlier.

The Templars, who numbered several hundred originally, suffered many hardships at first due to the harshness of the land and climate and the outbreak of epidemics, but by the 1900s these dedicated protestants had created a little modern hub for themselves that expanded into the surrounding areas. They not only built the best houses, but they also created a viable economy within the city and even introduced the first transportation system in Haifa. Their contributions helped to spur on future urban growth in the city. Today, the German Colony area (primarily its existing buildings) and the Baha'i Shrine and Gardens, which are adjacent to each other, have become the most significant landmarks in Haifa. Ben Gurion Boulevard has been transformed into a lively row of restaurants, cafes and bars that attract both tourists and locals, and as I pounded the pavement on my way to the Baha'i Shrine and Garden I could see this firsthand. Many of the establishments along the boulevard are housed inside preserved Templar buildings. As night fell over the city, the street began to fill with diners and revelers.

I reached the base of the Baha'i Shrine and Gardens and was totally blown away by the view at night. The beautifully manicured hillside stretched upwards towards the shrine and beyond (to the upper section we visited earlier), lit up like it was Christmas Eve in New York City. I had to risk standing in the middle of the street with my camera in order to get the whole thing in one frame, it was that large. And I wasn't the only one. Every tourist with a cellphone was snapping pictures of the site like crazy. I headed back to the hotel, stopping to photograph some of the former Templar buildings inside one historic square on Ben Gurion Boulevard. I ran into Mary Beth and Laura from my group and they told me about a grocery store not far from our hotel where I picked up some light snacks before returning to my room. It was now 8:30pm and I was dog-tired after another long day of sightseeing. I watched the BBC International News channel for a while before going to bed.

Day Five

I was awake by 4:30am and performed my travel exercise routine before shaving and showering. Over several cups of coffee I busied myself repacking, editing photos and watching television. By 7:00am I placed my luggage in the

hallway for the porter and headed downstairs for breakfast, which turned out to be pretty lame. It was Saturday, the Sabbath (or Shabbat), and the hotel was understaffed. The food options were limited. I think I had a hard-boiled egg, yogurt and some fruit. By 8:00am we were on the bus heading to our first destination of the day, the gleaming white cliffs and cave system of Rosh Hanikra in the northernmost tip of Israel, adjacent to the Lebanese border. We traveled north out of Haifa along Highway 22 (I believe) which later turned into Highway 4, another major coastal artery that ends at the border with Lebanon.

During the drive Alon spoke about Shabbat, Judaism's day of rest. According to Jewish religious law (*halakha*), Shabbat is observed on Friday, just a few minutes before sundown until about an hour after sundown on Saturday. The origins of this holy day is traced back to the Torah (in the Book of Genesis) when God rested on the Seventh Day after creating the Heavens and the Earth. Alon mentioned that the passage of time in the ancient world wasn't recorded with the same technical precision that is used today. A day back then was measured from sunup to sundown, a month by the lunar cycle, a year by the constellations or the growing of crops or the changing of the seasons. The use of a seven-day week can be traced to the year 321AD when the Romans, influenced by this Judeo-Christian concept, adopted it for their empire. The Jewish religious calendar, he told us, counts all days from sunup to sundown. Back then, Jews simply counted each passing day as Day One, Day Two, and so forth until they reached Day Seven, the day of rest, and then they would begin counting all over again. This unbroken seventh-day Shabbat among the Jewish people is traditionally regarded as their first and most sacred institution. There are variations of the Sabbath within the *Abrahamic* (Hebrew, Christian and Islamic) faiths and other religions, but they're all derived, it would seem, from this original Jewish ritual of celebrating the day God rested. For observant Jews, the Sabbath is a day of refraining from the rigors of daily labor. It is seen as a festive day, it allows for spiritual connection and spending time with family and entails ritualistic meals and prayers. I will discuss Shabbat again later in this journal. Our farewell meal was actually a Shabbat dinner with a family in Jerusalem.

We reached Rosh Hanikra by 9:00am. Our bus parked just outside what appeared to be a buffer zone border with Lebanon. We were now in the Upper Galilee region of Israel. The Galilee traditionally refers to the mountainous region located between northern Israel and southern Lebanon and incorporates a wide swath of Israel's northcentral region. More specifically, Rosh Hanikra is located in what today is referred to as Western Galilee, the area of the Upper Galilee that runs along the Mediterranean coastline just south of the border with Lebanon. The

geological formation of the area contains several Israeli nature reserves. One of the most popular sites is the Rosh Hanikra grottoes, which are a system of connected cave passages carved out of the soft white cliffs along the shoreline by millions of years of pounding sea waves. We spent an hour and a half here learning about the grottoes and exploring the cave system.

When we arrived, Alon took us on a short walk to the fenced crossing area that forms a buffer zone separating Israel from Lebanon. Although we could not see beyond the fence, it was covered by camouflaged netting, I'm quite certain the IDF (the Israel Defense Force) has a strong presence here. Off the coast we could see Israeli naval boats on patrol. A sign near the fence explained that this was the spot where in 1949 an armistice treaty between Israel and Lebanon was signed, officially establishing this border. Alon approached the young Israeli soldier guarding the crossing and asked him some questions for the group. He was a twenty-year old Israeli male who wore a small white yarmulke fastened to the top of his head. He was friendly but kept his assault rifle in a no-nonsense defensive posture across the front of his torso the whole time. Alon told us that Lebanon is seen as a failed state, and therefore security is pretty tight along the border. He explained to us that in a 'failed state' the country's economy and political system are so weak the government is no longer in control. In the case of Lebanon, he said, groups of armed militias and criminal gangs run large sections of the country.

From here we headed over to the cable cars that transport visitors from the top of the cliffs to the entrance of the cave system located near the shoreline. According to the site, the cable cars are the steepest in the world, with a 60-degree gradient. At that hour of the morning there were hardly any visitors so we didn't have to make a long queue. Before entering the cave we sat inside a tunnel that was once part of a British railway system to view a 20-minute film about the natural habitat of Rosh Hanikra. This now defunct underground railway tunnel, originally built during the Mandate period and later enlarged by the Israelis, connected the cave systems beneath the cliffs, allowing for its current entrance. Prior to this, only divers and native swimmers could access the grottoes from the sea.

The film we saw explained how the grottoes were formed geologically and the types of fauna that flourish here like the loggerhead sea turtles and a species of fish called Osteichthyes. Afterwards, we walked through the cave system. It is not very long, encompassing only 200 meters (or 660 feet) of tunnel space (at least the part that can be traversed by foot). What is fascinating about the grottoes is not their length but rather their unique formations carved out by the never ending collision of sea waves against the cliffs. A lighted path takes you through the meandering

system, branching off into smaller caverns exposed to the Mediterranean by holes and other unusual openings created by sea erosion. As we traversed the caves we had to be careful of sudden gushes of water whenever a large wave hit the shore. We emerged along the bottom of the cliffs several hundred meters from the cable cars and returned to the top.

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By 10:30am we were on the highway again heading towards the coastal city of Acre located 20 kilometers south of the Lebanese border. During our drive, Alon was on the mic giving us some general information concerning Israel's economy. For a nation of only ten million people (roughly), Israel packs quite an economic punch. In 2022, the year before I visited, the British publication *The Economist* ranked Israel as the 4th most successful economy among developed nations, a fact made more incredible when you realize that the country's overall economy had struggled during its first few decades under a state-controlled socialist-style model. But starting in the 1970s, liberal, free-market reforms were introduced and over the ensuing decades this spirit of entrepreneurism has really taken off, growing the economy by leaps and bounds. In fact, the country has the second-largest amount of start-up companies in the world, behind only the United States. Pretty remarkable when you consider Israel is relatively poor when it comes to natural resources and must import over a 100 billion dollars worth of raw materials and products annually. And what drives this economic miracle? Their technological industries, according to Alon.

To put this into perspective, Israel currently has the third largest number of companies listed on NASDAQ after the U.S. and China. Over 400 multi-national tech companies have research and development facilities in Israel, in addition to the country's own high-tech firms, all of which are situated along the coastal plain region collectively referred to as the *Silicon Wadi* (a play on the phrase 'Silicon Valley'). To understand why Israel is a leader in the high-tech industry worldwide, one must understand its educational system and something about the Israeli mindset, Alon told us. Since its inception, the country has developed an exceptional educational system with emphasis on *quality* higher education, resulting in a populace that tends to be not only well-educated but also highly motivated. Working hand-in-hand with this constant crop of high tech scientists and engineers is a strong venture capital industry that formed in the 1980s and supplies the funding for most of the new start-up companies today. Alon went on to tell us that, in his opinion, one of the driving forces behind the growth of the

high-tech industry in the country – beyond the educational system and the financial funding – is an underlying cultural factor simply called 'chutzpah'. Israelis, he stated, like to consider themselves as smart, innovative people who are continuously improving and advancing new ideas and technologies. This self-confidence, reflected in an "I can do it better" mentality, has spurred on many of the new start-up companies in the country.

Another topic Alon touched upon during the drive was the overall healthspan of Israelis as compared to other well-developed countries. For example, he told us the life expectancy in Israel is currently a little higher than it is in the United States. Why? For one, Israel does not suffer from the spiraling drug epidemics (opioids, meth, cocaine) that seem to constantly plague our country, he said. The reason behind this is that Israel is a small country with close family and societal ties. Interventions and counseling are more readily available before things get out of hand. Another factor that plays into the overall Israeli healthspan is accessible *and* affordable health care. A third factor he mentioned was the Israeli diet, which tends to be a lot healthier than the typical American fare. (*Although, in our defense, I think we win out on taste*).

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We entered the city of Acre (Akko in Hebrew) around 11:00am. Our purpose here was to visit the walled Old City section along the shoreline that dates back to the Crusader period. Acre is listed as one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the Middle East, the reason why is due to its strategic position. The city lies within a natural harbor on the extremity of the Haifa Bay. In addition to its port, Acre was also situated along the ancient coastal road, a former land route that stretched from Egypt to the empires of what are now Syria, Turkey and Iraq. The city became a sort of way station for people crossing into the plain of Jezreel and the Jordan Valley. In the year 1104, Acre was captured during the First Crusade by the forces of King Baldwin I, the king of Jerusalem and one of the best commanders of the Crusader period. Acre proved to be an important link between the various Crusader armies and their push into the Levant. It allowed them not only a strategic military foothold in the area, in which they could attack or defend from both land and sea, but also made them wealthy by giving them access to a vibrant trading route that included the Asian spice trade.

Alon spoke briefly about the Crusades, which were a series of religious wars supported by the Catholic Church during medieval times. The most famous of the crusades were the ones initiated to retake the Holy Land from Muslim rulers. Around the year 1,000 AD, Alon said, opinions concerning the lack of a Second Coming were intertwined with the notion that Christians were not in control of the Holy Land anymore. The occupation of Jerusalem by empires of a different religion (Islam) was seen as perhaps one of the reasons Jesus had not returned. During the Council of Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II included a call to arms to assist the Byzantine emperor against the Muslim Seljuk Turks and recapture Jerusalem for Christendom. This led to the First Crusade. By 1135, four separate Crusader states had been established throughout different territories incorporating parts of what are today Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine. Because of the importance of the region both religiously and economically, holding onto these Crusader states proved challenging. Between the 12th and 13th centuries multiple crusades had to be carried out. Eventually, the forces aligned against them were so great that the last of the crusaders were expelled by the Mamluk dynasty in 1291. And while several more, less organized crusades were attempted afterwards, by the 14th century the Crusader Period was effectively over.

Alon also mentioned something about the crusades that often gets overlooked by the whole religious aspect of these campaigns, and that was the underlying role feudalism played in all of this. Under the medieval feudal system, monarchs parceled out their kingdoms to the nobility who in turn pledged their support and funded the crown. These feudal lands and titles were usually passed on to the eldest son. But what happens when there are too many ambitious sons and not enough land to go around? The answer: invade, invade, and invade. The violent acquisition of new territories solely for material gain is a practice as old as civilization itself, Alon reminded us, and some of these crusaders may have been motivated by more than just religious fervor.

As we drove into the city we passed an Arab Christian Boy Scouts parade in progress. Acre is one of the eight cities in the country classified as a *mixed city* by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. Its current population is just over 51,000. A mixed city is one where more than 10 percent of the total population is Arab. In the case of Acre, almost one-third of its residents are Israeli Arabs (both Muslim and Christian). In Israel, the definition of a mixed city is not the same as a *multicultural* city in other parts of the world. It essentially means these are the cities where the largest numbers of Israeli Jews and Arabs encounter one another on a regular basis. Social integration, for the most part, has eluded Israeli society. Outside of these eight cities there is very little mixing going on between Israeli Jews and Arabs, and

even within these 'mixed cities' the two groups live in segregated neighborhoods. The geographical and social exclusion of the Arab population within Israel has resulted in a huge socio-economic disparity between Jews and Arabs. Studies have shown that, in general, Israeli Arab communities receive a lower portion of funding for infrastructure, housing, welfare and education. Not surprisingly, this 'double standard' has been one of the strongest motivating factors behind previous unrests and riots within the country. Acre is also home to the recently constructed Baha'i Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Baha, where the remains of the founder of the Baha'i Faith lie, making it a Holy City and place of pilgrimage for Baha'is the world over.

Alon took us on a walk through the historic Old City, which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. When the last of the crusader forces fell in Acre (in 1291), the city was basically destroyed and left derelict for centuries until it was rebuilt on top of the crusader ruins, its defensive walls fully restored. Much of what one sees today is actually from the Ottoman period, but excavations have unearthed some incredible crusader structures. We began our tour just outside the formidable-looking walls of the Ottoman-built citadel along the quarter's northern boundary. We walked through the Gan HaMetsuda Festival Garden, an open courtyard near the visitors' entrance and entered the remains of the former citadel built by the Knight Hospitaller (or, officially, the *Order of the Knights of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem*). Established in Jerusalem in 1099, this Catholic military order arose from within the Benedictine monastic order and sought to strengthen religious devotion and charity for the poor. In the early 11th century a hospital dedicated to John the Baptist opened in Jerusalem to care for the sick and poor and to aid Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. The Knights Hospitaller was initially formed during the First Crusade to support this hospital and grew into a powerful military order tasked by the pope with defending the Holy Land, among its other objectives. In Acre they built a heavily-fortified citadel to protect the sea lane and provide support to other crusaders in the region. They were eventually expelled by the Mamluk dynasty in 1291, becoming the last crusader holdout to fall in the Levant.

The reconstruction of Acre occurred mainly during the 1700s and much of the architecture of the original Knights Hospitaller citadel seemed lost forever. But during the 1990s excavations beneath the current, Ottoman-built citadel and its former prison have unearthed segments of the knight's fortress, including a series of halls and sections of medieval streets dating back to this period. What has been restored or rebuilt is quite fascinating, giving one a solid glimpse of what the original citadel looked like back then. As you enter the courtyard in front of the excavated crusader fortress you'll see a scale model of the original Knights

Hospitaller citadel, which defended the northern access to Acre. In niches along the perimeter of this courtyard are displays containing authentic columns, stone vases, and a massive, hooked sailing anchor made of iron dating back to the crusaders. We entered a cavernous building called the Knights Hall which is probably the best restored of the crusader structures; the building once served as a refectory (dining hall) for the Knights Hospitaller. The hall was mostly bare, which enhanced its impressive size, with stone block walls and arched columns supporting a high vaulted ceiling in an architectural style favored by the crusaders. Carved into the stone columns or pillars we could see images of a fleur-de-lis, a lily-shaped symbol (think New Orleans Saints' logo) that represented the royal coat of arms of France and was used by the French crusaders known as the Knights Templar. Throughout the crusader period, different orders of knights set up shop in Acre, and even controlled different sections of the city. Hanging from the ceiling are replicas of different crusader flags which gave the hall a very authentic feel. Several display cases along the walls offered ceramic plates and cookware excavated at the site.

Alon took us on a slow walk through the Turkish Bazaar, a public marketplace set up along the labyrinthine alleyways just to the south of the former Knights Hospitaller citadel. During its heyday, the city contained several khans (or caravanserais) established by foreign merchant groups operating in the city. A khan served as an inn where traveling merchants could spend the night and have their goods safely stored or protected. The square around these khans had marketplaces. Today, whatever khans remain exist only as preserved historical structures. The Turkish Bazaar is now the main public market of Acre. As we meandered its narrow alleyways we passed vendors selling everything from fruits and vegetables to spices sold by weight stored in large sacks. The seafood vendors had tables with plastic crates laden with a variety of fish caught daily off the coastline. The smell of baking bread, spices and fish permeated the air. One can also buy clothing, toys, beauty supplies and souvenirs here. Sections of the alleyway were covered to provide protection during bad weather. Usually, public markets like these are very busy in the early morning. By the time we made our way through the bazaar the larger crowds were already gone.

We reached the southeastern section of the Old City near the well-preserved Khan of the Pillars (*Khan al-Umdan*). This was the largest caravanserai (inn) in Acre, constructed in the late 1700s under the rule of Ahmed Jezzar Pasha. He was the governor credited with some of the grander architectural projects built in Acre during the Ottoman era. This particular section of the Old City once served as the internal anchorage of the city's port area. Along the southwestern edges of the Old

City the Knights Templar had their own fortress. The Knights Templar (officially called the *Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon*) was established by a French knight after the First Crusades and headquartered near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Their purpose was to help protect the newly-created Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Christian pilgrims who traveled to the Holy Land. Towards the end of the 12th century, Muslim forces under the legendary ruler Saladin retook Jerusalem and began driving the crusaders out of the Levant, including Acre. Guy de Lusignan, the displaced King of Jerusalem, launched a counter-attack that succeeded in recapturing Acre in 1191 after a protracted siege. Acre then became the *new* capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and remained so until its final fall in 1291. The southwestern sector of the city was allocated to the Knights Templar who constructed a large fortress here that no longer exists. But one thing they did build remains to this day: the Templar Tunnel.

The Templar Tunnel was a secret passageway underneath the Old City that connected the Knights Templar fortress to the port area. For 700 years this tunnel lay hidden and unknown to the residents of Acre, and then by chance in 1994 a blocked sewage pipe inadvertently exposed the whole thing. It has since been excavated and restored and visitors can now traverse its 150 meters (492 feet) on foot. The tunnel was dug out of the natural rock beneath Acre in a semi-barrel arch, its ceiling supported by hewn stones. We walked the entire length, crouching in certain areas that were lower to the ground. The reasons for constructing the tunnel were varied. It offered a quick escape to the Templar fortress if the rest of the city was attacked. The tunnel also provided a way to sneak supplies into Acre if it was besieged. But Alon told us one of the uses of this clandestine tunnel had nothing to do with its defense or even the chivalric nature of the Knights Templar. The tunnel was also used by the Templars, he said, to avoid paying taxes or tribute on goods entering through the port. *Hmm, go figure*.

The western end of the tunnel was where the Templar fortress once stood. We emerged from the tunnel and climbed to the top of the defensive walls reconstructed under the Ottomans, walking the ramparts along the southeastern part of the Old City near the port area. Looking out over the Mediterranean Sea from this vantage point we could see the Israeli coastline stretching southward. In the distance were wind-surfers skimming over the choppy waters. We returned to ground level and made our way back to the citadel where we had lunch at the Elmoalem Restaurant directly adjacent to the Al-Jazzar Mosque. This elegant mosque dates back to 1781. A strand of hair from the beard of the Prophet Muhammad is reportedly kept as a relic inside this mosque. We sat outside the restaurant, around a series of tables shielded by large sun umbrellas, while waiters

placed tray after tray of food before us. We ate grilled chicken, falafel, pita bread, hummus, assorted olives, and several types of salad. During lunch we experienced the Muslim call to prayer (*adhan*) over the loudspeakers of the Al-Jazzar Mosque, an experience that, for some reason, always startles me no matter how many times I've heard it throughout my travels.

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By 1:30pm we were back on the bus driving to our next destination, the biblical town of Nazareth. From Acre we drove east through the hills of the Lower Galilee region for nearly an hour, passing farmlands and small towns along the way. We entered the outskirts of Nazareth just before 2:00pm. The city is nestled within one of the hill ranges between the Jordan Valley and the Jezreel plains in the Lower Galilee. It's population is just over 78,000. Present day Nazareth is divided into two parts. The old town is inhabited by mostly Israeli Arabs while the newer areas to the north are part of a large Jewish district founded in the 1950s. As we drove through the old town I could tell just from looking out the window that this was an Arab city. Alon told us it is often referred to as the "Arab capital of Israel", being the only city in the country with a population *over* 50,000 that is predominately Arab. But I would argue that the phrase 'overwhelmingly Arab' would be a more apt description. There are very few Jews living in the old town section of Nazareth. And if you factor in the nearby municipalities that fall within the greater Nazareth metropolitan area (some 210,000 inhabitants) almost 60 percent are Arabs.

Nazareth commands a lot of respect within the religious community worldwide. It is the biblical hometown of Jesus, the central figure of Christianity who is also considered a prophet in Islam. Thirty-one percent of the Arabs in the city are Christians and are divided between the various Latin, Orthodox and Protestant faiths, making Nazareth the largest Arab Christian community in Israel. Of these Christian groups the most predominate is the Greek Orthodox. Like in other areas of the country, the Arab Christians here are proportionately better off than their Muslim counterparts, controlling many top positions in the city. I read online that the socio-economic disparity between Christian and Muslim Arabs has sometimes led to sectarian protests and violence. Alon told us the growth of the Arab population in the city can be traced back to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War when an influx of Palestinian Arabs – who were internally displaced as a result of the fighting – ended up taking refuge in Nazareth. Today, the city is recognized as a

religious, economic and political center for the Arab citizens of Israel, and as such also serves as a center for Arab or Palestinian nationalism.

Nazareth has long been a place of Christian pilgrimage. There are many shrines here dedicated to biblical events, but probably none greater than the two churches which *both* claim to be the spot where the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary to tell her she would be giving birth to Jesus. The two churches are the Catholic *Basilica of the Annunciation* and the *Greek Orthodox Church of the Anunciation*. We visited the Catholic one located along the busy Paulus ha-Shishi Street, recognized as the largest Christian church in the Middle East (and a real tourism draw, I might add). The reason there are two claimants to the spot where the annunciation took place is due to biblical references. The Catholic tradition holds that the annunciation took place at the home of the Virgin Mary. The Basilica of the Annunciation was constructed over the archaeological remains of what is believed to be the cave dwelling where Mary lived. And, in fact, archaeological excavations beneath the church date back to ancient Nazareth. The Greek Orthodox Church, on the other hand, follows another tradition based on the Gospel of James (an *infancy gospel* that chronicles the miraculous conception of Mary, her upbringing and marriage to Joseph, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the events immediately following). In this gospel, the annunciation is described as having taken place while Mary was drawing water from a local spring in Nazareth, and this is the site where the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation was built. Regardless of each church's claim, it is universally accepted (by Christians) that the annunciation occurred somewhere in the vicinity of these two churches. So take your pick.

As far as sheer aesthetics are concerned, the Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation appears to be the clear winner. The church was constructed on the same site where several other churches have stood since the Byzantine period commemorating the annunciation. And it's a fairly new structure having been built in the 1960s. The building was designed by Italian architect Giovanni Muzio who was famous within the *Novecento Italiano* ('Italian 1900s') movement of the 1920s and 30s which sought to create art based on the fascist rhetoric of the dictator Mussolini. I thought this was a rather odd choice. I mean, to pick an architect for such an important religious monument who had spent his younger career trying to blend art with fascist principles. But then again, religion and fascism seem to go 'hand-in-hand'. All across the world we see dictatorships that either embrace, insert or enshrine the conservative values of religion into their political dogma, as if the suspension of civil liberties and the eroding of political rights are more palpable if done in the name of God. But let me not go off on a rant here…

As someone who has seen a gazillion churches by now, I have to admit Muzio's architectural design was quite impressive. This massive two-story basilica became the largest Christian church in the Middle East when it was completed in 1969. Its towering cupola – surmounted by a lantern symbolizing the Light of the World – rises over the cave believed to be the site of the Virgin Mary's home (and where the annunciation supposedly happened). The cream-colored limestone façade along its western entrance has reliefs of Mary, Gabriel and the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Above them is a bronze statue of Jesus. The entrance into the church is a magnificent pair of bronze doors detailed with engravings depicting the life of Jesus from his birth to his crucifixion.

We went inside and discovered three levels. The bottom level, which is centered in the middle of the church and right below where we entered, has a sunken grotto containing the cave-home of the Virgin Mary. The cave is enshrined within the bottom level of the church and sealed off by a grill. Inside is an altar and behind it a stone stairway leading, I would imagine, to other parts of this former cave dwelling. Surrounding the grotto are remnants of the previous churches that stood here (dating back to the 5th century). We went down into this section to view the shrine (home) of the Virgin Mary. It was a small cave chamber that has been partially excavated and renovated with tile flooring, giving it a more modern look.

The basilica has two churches, one on the middle level where we entered and another very spacious one on the third floor interconnected by a spiral stairway. The upper section serves as the parish church of the Arab Catholic community of Nazareth. The images depicting the Stations of the Cross are inscribed in Arabic, something I had never seen before. We kept quiet as a Mass was being held when we visited. Along the stone walls of the upper church were numerous murals, statues and mosaic artworks of the Virgin Mary and Child donated by countries from around the world. Each had its own artistic style and interpretation. The one from Korea showed the Virgin Mary and Child with Asian facial features. Above the altar, the ceiling opened up into the gorgeous cupola, an awe-inspiring view. Behind the altar was a gigantic mosaic that covered almost the entire wall, depicting the Catholic Church as the one true apostolic church. The main entrance of the upper church is located on the structure's northern side next to a wide elevated plaza overlooking the valley of Nazareth. We exited through there and made our way back down to ground level via a stairway, passing a section of the ongoing excavations of unearthed dwellings from the ancient town of Nazareth beneath the church.

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After our stop at the Basilica of the Annunciation we drove in a northeastern direction out of Nazareth. Our next stop was to visit the Church of the Beatitudes located atop a hill above the Sea of Galilee. Twenty minutes into our journey we drove through the Arab town of Kfar Kanna, which was known in the New Testament as the village of Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle, turning water into wine at a wedding. Shortly beyond Kfar Kanna we turned east and drove another five kilometers before proceeding north again on Highway 65 through the Lower Galilee region, its terrain characterized by areas of low mountain ranges and fertile plains. Approximately an hour after leaving Nazareth we reached a hilly lookout point situated off the northern banks of the Sea of Galilee to get a nice view of this historic body of water. We were near what was once the ancient fishing village of Capernaum, a place cited in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This area along the northwestern rim of the Sea of Galilee was where Jesus began his ministry and performed many of his miracles, and where many of his disciples hailed from.

The Sea of Galilee is a misnomer. Situated between the Golan Heights and the Galilee region, it is actually a freshwater lake stretching some 21 kilometers (13 miles) from north to south. Alon told us it is the second lowest freshwater lake in the world at roughly 700 feet below sea level. We took panoramic photos of the lake before proceeding to the site of the Church of the Beatitudes a short distance away. This small church was built during the late 1930s and designed by Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi, who spent a good portion of his career creating many pilgrimage churches in the Holy Land. The project was funded in part by dictator Mussolini. The Church of the Beatitudes has an octagonal shape, the eight sides representing the eight Beatitudes. It was built just uphill from the ruins of a previous church dating back to the Byzantine period.

Catholic tradition dictates that this open hilly area overlooking the Sea of Galilee was the spot where Jesus gave his famous *Sermon on the Mount*, a collection of sayings spoken by Jesus of Nazareth emphasizing his moral teachings. And what a perfect place to give a sermon, too. A nice spot where devotees could gather on the open fields and listen to Jesus with the surrounding hilltops and the Sea of Galilee as a backdrop. It was quite serene and beautiful. In addition, just down the hillsides from the ‘mount’ – along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee – lay two important fishing villages from the New Testament.

Capernaum was the hometown of Matthew the Apostle and the place where Jesus performed several miraculous healings; *Tabgha* was the village where Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes as mentioned in the Book of Mark. I'm assuming the 'word by mouth' of Jesus' miracles probably drew a fairly decent crowd wherever he spoke. And while Catholic scholars and historians are fairly certain this was the site of his famous sermon, Alon mentioned that Jesus more than likely repeated his sermons wherever he went, which is why other areas of Israel claim to be the site of the original Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, and serves as the first of five discourses laying out the teachings and instructions of Jesus. It is probably the best quoted of his discourses due to the eight Beatitudes. The Beatitudes were sayings or blessings Jesus gave in his sermon. Even if you're not a Christian, or remotely religious, you've definitely heard of some of them, like *Blessed Are the Meek for They Shall Inherit the Earth* or *Blessed Are the Merciful For they Shall Obtain Mercy*. The Sermon on the Mount also produced what has become the most commonly recited version of the Lord's Prayer worldwide, which begins with "Our Father, Who Art in Heaven, Hallow be Thy Name….". The walkway leading to the Church of the Beatitudes is lined with stone monuments inscribed with the eight Beatitudes in different languages.

A large group of African Christians were visiting the site when we arrived. Before entering the church, Alon gathered us outside and gave us some information about the history of the area and the sermon itself. We then toured the inside of the Church of the Beatitudes. This was not a large structure by any means. It had a relatively simple design. The altar was in the middle of the church surrounded by eight diagonal wall sections, each section encircling the altar had an inscription of one of the Beatitudes. Wooden pews were arranged around the altar. After touring the church we walked back to our bus and continued to our last stop of the day, a kibbutz in the Upper Galilee region where we would be spending the next two nights.

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We traveled north along Highway 90 from the Church of the Beatitudes, crossing into the Upper Galilee via the Beit Hakerem Valley which acts as the boundary between the two regions. Unlike the low mountain ranges of the Lower

Galilee, the Beit Hakerem Valley is characterized by its higher elevation and is situated between two tall mountain ranges: to the northwest are the mountains that separate northern Israel from southern Lebanon, and to the east are the wetlands of the Hula Valley and the mountainous areas of the Golan Heights that separate Israel from Syria. It seemed the further north we traveled into the Upper Galilee the more scenic the area became. In fact, this region is known for its natural beauty. We saw heavily-cultivated agricultural fields and passed lush wetlands and patches of Mediterranean forests and striking vistas formed by the Golan Heights in the distance. I will be describing the area in greater detail on Day Six. We reached the Pastoral Kfar Blum Hotel around 5:30pm. This beautiful complex is located within the Kfar Blum kibbutz, a tiny enclave of about 800 or so inhabitants located in the Hula Valley of Israel, in one of the northernmost sections of the country. As we entered the kibbutz we passed a small, peaceful rally of people holding up Israeli flags by the side of the road. They were protesting the impending changes to the country's Supreme Court that were being initiated by Netanyahu's right-wing government.

The Pastoral Hotel was my favorite accommodations while in Israel. I have to admit, prior to this trip my knowledge of kibbutzim was equal to what I knew about quantum physics, which is to say nothing at all. In my ignorant American mind, a kibbutz entailed a group of rural settlers who banded together and lived in barracks, slept on bunks and worked their asses off on farms for the sake of some socialist hippy society where everybody was one big, happy interconnected family. And what's even *more* embarrassing to admit, I thought when I got to the Kfar Blum kibbutz I would have to engage in some sort of menial labor, like hoe a field or milk a cow, in order to earn my keep. Incidentally, this is not as far-fetched as it sounds. I have been on many guided tours in which participation in some kind of daily, mundane activity such as market-shopping or cooking is considered part of the 'cultural emersion' aspect of the tour.

In this case, the hotel serves as a combination cultural, spiritual and nature retreat, with a series of buildings spread out over a wonderfully designed and well-manicured garden area. I'm assuming this retreat is a huge part of the Kfar Blum kibbutz' economy, employing many of its residents. You need a map to get around the complex, which contains, among other things, a theater, spa, classrooms, a main dining hall, and clusters of two-story buildings with spacious lodging accommodations. My only complaint was that I got lost the first night walking around the hotel grounds, which, if you've read any of my previous journals, will not surprise you as I have the worst sense of direction (despite being a retired mailman!). After the check-in process we split up and went to our separate rooms.

Mine looked and felt like a small apartment. It was called the Barbara Streisand room and a picture of the singer was framed on the wall staring at me the whole time. I half-expected it to start singing '*Memories*'. And let me tell you, it would have been fitting, because *memories*, good ones, were all I have of this place. The room had an espresso maker and I churned one out and sat on the large balcony sipping the foamy, delicious coffee while taking in the view of the gardens in back of my building and watching dusk settling over the Golan Heights mountain range in the distance. It was a wonderful, very relaxing moment, indeed.

I unpacked the clothes I would be wearing over the next two days and wrote the day's details in my journal notebook. At 7:30pm I walked over to the dining hall in the main building for what was a very large and satisfying buffet, with numerous food stations. I sat with Susie and her husband David from New Jersey. This was another long but rewarding day of sightseeing and I returned to my room by 9:00pm thoroughly exhausted. I'm certain the huge meal I just finished eating added to my sleepiness. I was in bed by 9:30pm. That night I dreamt I was performing in the musical *Hello, Dolly*…

Day Six

I was wide-awake by 4:30am after a solid seven hours of glorious sleep. Feeling fully refreshed, I exercised, shaved, showered and spent the morning sending texts and photos to family and friends back home. As the sun started to rise over the valley I sat on my balcony and watched the event unfold over the mountains of the Golan Heights…um, espresso in hand. It felt great to be alive. The only sound I heard beyond those of nature itself was a crop-duster plane overhead. At 7:15am I walked over to the dining hall for a delicious breakfast buffet. An hour later we were on the bus for what turned out to be a day-long sightseeing tour of the Upper Galilee.

Our first stop of the day was a visit to the Hula Nature Reserve about 18 kilometers (roughly 11 miles) south of our hotel. During the 25-minute drive Alon spoke briefly about kibbutzim and the special role these communities have played in the formation of modern-day Israel. He told us that the notion of kibbutzim

came from Eastern Europe and was combined with the ideas of collectivism inspired by communist philosophy; people who banded together as a group and worked for the betterment of the entire community. Many Jews felt the commune systems of Russia had failed them because there were still pogroms or discriminations against Jews. In the early 20th century, Zionists imported the socialist ideas of kibbutzim to the southern Levant. Alon said these communities played a significant role not only in the battle for independence but also in the early development of the country. As the war for independence intensified, the kibbutz system offered ready-made soldiers; men who routinely defended their communities and were accustomed to shared living. It was easy to organize them into fighting units. And in the early stages of the country's development, kibbutzim was essential in settling many of the areas of Israel.

Alon also talked about life in a kibbutz, especially during those early years. Children stayed together and were watched over by the mothers of the entire community. The proverbial ' it takes a village' concept. Not only did this inspire a close-knit community, he said, but it also freed up the mothers to work and improve the kibbutz because all their children were being cared for collectively. According to Alon, mothers would sometimes only spend a few hours a day with their children, but it was quality time. I'm not a psychologist, but it would seem to me this type of communal upbringing produced children with good social and emotional skills. Decades after the formation of the State of Israel, he continued, opinions concerning the kibbutz way of life began to change. As Israeli cities grew larger and the economy of the country improved, the appeal of the kibbutz started to decline for a large segment of the population. For poor Israelis the kibbutz lifestyle might seem very promising, but not for the upper or middle classes. The communal aspect of kibbutzim – which is to say the sharing of its labor and resources – is not compatible with the concepts of capitalism and private ownership of property. Rich Israelis, like rich people everywhere, have the means to live in comfort, so the notion of communal living for them is not a desirous one. As for the middle class – who tend to be, or are trying to be, upwardly mobile – it is difficult to live in a community that emphasizes the group over the individual. As Israel's economy and infrastructure continues to grow, it will be interesting to see what role these communities will play in the future.

We arrived at the Hula Nature Reserve by 8:40am. This section of the Upper Galilee is called the Hula Valley, its freshwater marshes form an important agricultural region in Northern Israel. Alon told us the entire Hula Valley is approximately 177 square kilometers. For my American readers it measures 16 miles in length and has a width of about 4 miles. It lies at an elevation of 70 meters

above sea level within a large rift valley. The sides of this valley are hemmed in by steep mountain slopes. On its western side are the Naftali Mountains separating Israel from Lebanon; on its eastern side are the mountains of the Golan Heights, which border Syria. Prior to the formation of the State of Israel, a large freshwater lake called Lake Hula took up a prominent position in the valley. This marsh-like body of water was filled by perennial springs fed by water run-off from the nearby mountains. To the south of the valley are basalt hills that intercept the Jordan River and form a natural blockage, restricting water drainage further down stream to the Sea of Galilee. As a result, throughout most of its history the Hula Valley was primarily a large swampy area.

Due to its abundance of fish and wildlife (and its suitability for farming), this region has been settled by humans going back nearly 10,000 years. During the Bronze Age the Hula Valley served as an important trade route between Syria (Damascus) and the Mediterranean. And since antiquity there have always been rural, agricultural settlements living here. Rice and cotton were planted as far back as the Hellenistic Age (the Ancient Greeks). Sugar cane was introduced after the Arab conquest of the region in the 7th century. Maise and sorghum found its way here from the Americas. Water buffalo were brought here to work the fields in the 1700s. Most of the inhabitants living in the valley by the 20th century were Bedouin, which describes any group of pastoral nomadic tribal Arabs. The first Jewish settlement in the Hula Valley was the *Yesud HaMa'ala* – established in 1883 and still in existence today – during the First Aliyah. These were settlers from the initial wave of Jewish immigrants who left Eastern Europe for the Levant between 1881 and 1903. They created agricultural communities called *Moshava*.

But life here was tough. The shallowness of Lake Hula and its surrounding marshlands were the perfect breeding grounds for mosquitos. Mortality rates from malaria were exceptionally high. After the creation of the State of Israel it was decided to drain the lake and most of its marshes to not only eradicate this health threat but also to establish a more productive and modern agricultural industry. This was carried out during the 1950s. The project entailed deepening and widening the Jordan River downstream and digging canals to divert the Jordan River in the northern part of the valley. When the project was completed in 1958 it was considered a huge engineering accomplishment for the country.

Unfortunately, the draining of the Hula Valley, while successful on one level, also led to unintended and negative consequences to the area's delicate ecosystem. The drying out of the swamp caused the extinction of the endemic fauna around the lake, including several species of freshwater fish that once thrived there.

Chemical fertilizers began seeping into the Sea of Galilee, negatively impacting the quality of its water. The drying out of the swamp also caused the topsoil to erode, leading to underground fires as exposed peat ignited spontaneously, creating wildlife fires that were difficult to control. Eventually, some of the wetlands had to be restored. In 1964, the Hula Nature Reserve was established. According to Alon, this became the country's first nature reserve. By the 1970s, the Nature Reserve Authority (known today as the Israel Nature and Reserve Authority), reconstructed the area in order to preserve the valley's natural flora and fauna. The authority built new dikes and a reservoir to collect fresh water, reconstructed the lake and wetlands and created a network of channels and dams to monitor the reserve's water quality and levels. Water buffalos were reintroduced, which graze on the local vegetation. A wooden bridge trail was set up over the wetlands with lookouts and an observation tower where visitors can see and study the many bird species that frequent the area. In 1978, the Hula Nature Reserve was opened to the public. Since then, some water plants have reemerged, and over 200 species of waterfowl now flock to the valley again. Additional flooding of 250 acres of peat soil in the early 1990s created a new pond, improving the water quality by allowing organic materials in the water to settle before reaching the Sea of Galilee. Today, all these efforts have helped restore the Hula Vally to its former status as an important migration and breeding site for birds. To put this into perspective, it is estimated that 500 *million* birds flock to the Hula Valley during their annual migration from Europe to Africa and back. A bird-watcher's wet dream.

We began our tour of the Hula Nature Reserve at the visitor's center to see an excellent short documentary film on the park and its role in the annual migration of birds. The visitor's center has a diorama featuring the more than 50 animals that now live in the Hula Valley, and one can also learn about the flora and fauna that have gone extinct here over the years. A 1.5-kilometer trail (nearly a mile) extends over the swamp from the visitor's center. While most of the park is closed to the public in order to conserve its natural habitat, the trail does offer visitors a view of most of the reserve, especially from the observation tower located at the northernmost section of the trail. We were given just over an hour to walk this short pathway through the swamp. I started at the observation point near the visitor's center. From here one can see across the entire Hula Valley, from the Golan Heights in the east to the Naftali Mountains ridge in the west.

I then proceeded to cross a channel and continued along one of the dikes heading north on a series of paved walkways and wooden bridges through the wetlands. Yellow pond lilies were in bloom, their large aquatic leaves floating in the water. Insects and small birds often rest on these leaves. The natural vegetation

along the waterway consisted of blackberry brambles, willows and tamarisks, and some invasive species like the castor oil plant and chinaberry tree. At different sections along the trail were information boards explaining the diverse plant life and animals within the park. I saw water buffalo grazing on a field on the other side of the swamp. A bit further down I came across a slow-moving coypu (or nutria) along the trail. This humongous furry rodent was first introduced into the country from South America for its fur, which proved to be of poor quality once the animal was transplanted into this new hot climate environment. As a result, the nutria fur industry shut down and some were released into the wild where they have become a growing and pesky invasive species. I also spotted a lutra (a member of the otter family) swimming in the water. According to the information board it is rare to spot these creatures in the daytime as they often hunt at night (eating fish and crabs) and hide in the bushes during the day. I saw quite a few swamp turtles sunning themselves on rocks or clumps of vegetation, and the water was teeming with large African catfish which have become the dominant fish species within the park. As for birds? Well, to use a catch phrase from my youth back in North Jersey: *up the wazoo*! I'm not a bird-watcher so I cannot accurately describe the birds I saw, suffice it to say there were plenty, although not as many as during the migration season. I saw different types of ducks, a ton of pelicans, some gray herons, egrets and a number of other large and smaller species of birds throughout my walk.

At one point the trail curved to the right over a long wooden bridge through an area of papyrus thicket. The Egyptians once made paper from these plants. Along this section of the swamp trail one can see a species of plant nettle that only grows in the Hula Valley, according to the site's information. I stopped at the observation tower for a quick panoramic view of the entire reserve before continuing to an enclosed wooden viewing platform further east called the *hideaway.* The platform sits just over the park's lake enabling visitors to observe the many species of birds in the water without disturbing them. I saw a pelican scoop up a fish and swallow it whole. That was pretty cool. Towards the middle of this lake/pond was a nesting island for common tern, a species of seabirds. This was pretty much the end of the trail so I returned to the visitor's center and rendezvoused with the group. I really enjoyed this stop and learning about the insane bird migrations that go on here. After using the bathroom facilities we re-boarded the bus. Our next destination was a visit to the holy city of Safed.

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From the Hula Nature Reserve we drove south through the Upper Galilee on Highway 90. During the 30-minute drive to Safed – one of the four holiest cities in Judaism – Alon spoke about what it means to be *Jewish*. He explained it by making an important distinction between Christianity and Judaism. He told us that one of the key differences between the two, aside from the obvious religious ones, is that Judaism tends to be *religion-based* while Christianity is *faith-based*. Jews believe they will be judged by what they do in life. In the Jewish tradition there are a set of rules that must be observed – eating kosher, observing the Sabbath, fasting on Yom Kippur, and so forth. In Judaism, a Jew can be secular and *still* be considered Jewish as long as he or she follows *some* of these rules. On the other hand, Christians believe they will be judged by their faith; if a person does not accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior then that person is not considered a Christian regardless of how they lived their lives. In other words, there are no secular Christians, only non-believers.

Before we arrived, Alon also gave us some background information on Safed. Situated along the mountainous western side of the Upper Galilee valley, at an elevation of nearly 3,000 ft, this is the highest city in Israel. In the Book of Judges (from the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament) the area where Safed is now located was assigned to the tribe of Naphtali, one of the original 12 tribes of Israel. In 722 BC, the Naphtali were exiled from the Kingdom of Israel after the conquest of the region by the Assyrian Empire, becoming one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Between the Talmudic Period (500BC – 400AD) and the Crusades, very little is known about Safed. In the year 1140, a fortress was built here by King Fulk, the crusader king of Jerusalem. The town was called *Saphet*. In 1168, Saphet was given over to the Knights Templar who were eventually replaced by the forces of Saladin (the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty) and *his* successors, the Mamluks; the latter strengthened the fortress and rebuilt the town.

When exactly Jews re-established themselves in Safed is not clear, but in the 13th century under the Mamluk era there was already a Jewish community living there that continued to grow, numbering around 300 Jewish families by 1481. A large influx of Sephardi Jews from Spain began arriving in Safed following the Spanish Expulsion of 1492. In that year, Spain was governed by two monarchs (Ferdinand and Isabella) whose combined armies had succeeded in casting out the last Muslim kingdom (the Nasrid dynasty of Granada) from their country, making Spain a unified Christian kingdom. The monarchs immediately ordered the forced expulsion of any Jew who did not convert to Christianity (known as the Alhambra Decree). Hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to leave the Iberian peninsula

and resettle elsewhere. Sadly, many were also killed or died while fleeing, and even the Jews who converted to Christianity were sometimes targeted by the Inquisition. When the Ottomans conquered Safed in the early 1500s, the Jewish community here continued to expand with further influx of Jews from Spain and the Maghreb (the northwestern region of Africa) and elsewhere. Records from this period show they were traders of spices, cheese, olive oil, fruits and vegetables.

Alon spoke about 'the four holiest cities in Judaism' (Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safed), telling us the phrase took shape during the time of the Ottoman Empire. These were the four cities that served as the main centers of Jewish life after the Ottoman conquest of the Levant. Each city is special in terms of Jewish history. *Jerusalem* is where King David chose as the location of the First Temple (becoming the spiritual center of Judaism). *Hebron* contains the Cave of the Patriarchs, the burial place of the Jewish patriarchs Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Leah. *Tiberias* was the place where the Jerusalem Talmud was composed and was the last meeting place of the *Sanhedrin* (the judicial and legislative assembly of Ancient Israel) before it was disbanded in the year 425AD. Tiberias also became a great center of religious study during the 18th and 19th centuries. The city of *Safed* has been a center of Kabbalistic teaching dating back to the 1500s. Our purpose in coming to Safed was to learn about Kabbalah, a type of Jewish mysticism, and to visit the city's historic quarter, which has many restored centuries-old synagogues.

Safed (also known as *Tzfat*) is situated on a mountaintop in what is the Northern District of Israel. Because of its high elevation, the winters are cold and often snowy but the summers are very pleasant, drawing tourists to the ancient picturesque streets of its Jewish quarter, restored synagogues and museums. Safed also has a famous Artists' Quarter located in what was once the Arab section of the city. The narrow streets here are lined with art shops and galleries. Alon told us that before 1948, Safed's population was primarily Arab, but in the fighting leading up to the country's independence the entire Arab population fled to the West Bank or abroad and the city is now completely Jewish. A large and growing Haredi community (often referred to as ultra-Orthodox Jews) exists in Safed, re-establishing the city as a center for Jewish religious studies.

We followed Highway 90 south through the Upper Galilee, turning west on Highway 89 just before the small moshav settlement of Elifelet, which is famous for producing edible grasshoppers for culinary use. I guess when you need kosher bugs in your food, this is the place to go to. We took Highway 89 up the mountainside to the lower limits of Safed and continued along the city's zig-

zagging hilly streets until we reached the Old City. Our first stop was a visit to the *Tzfat Gallery of Mystical Art* located on Tet Vav Street in the heart of the Artist Quarter. This was the workshop and gallery of Avraham Loewenthal, who greeted us at the door. We sat inside his gallery/workshop while he gave us an introductory lesson on the meaning and purpose of Kabbalah.

Avraham is originally from Michigan. He studied psychology at the University of Michigan before pursuing his real passion, enrolling in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to study painting. After his studies he made the decision to return to the Land of Israel ('making *aliyah*') where he now lives with his wife and children in Safed, painting and studying Kabbalah. He utilizes prayer, Jewish mysticism and contemporary art in his unique paintings to convey universal spiritual concepts of Kabbalah.

The artist told us that Kabbalah refers to an esoteric method, discipline and school of thought in Jewish mysticism. And while the definition of Kabbalah can vary according to the traditions and aims of those following it, essentially Jewish Kabbalah is a set of esoteric teachings that try and explain the relationship between God – the unchanging, eternal God known as *Ein Sof* – and God's creation, the mortal, finite universe we all live in. Kabbalah is the basis of mystical (or spiritual) religious interpretations within Judaism. Early Jewish Kabbalists developed their own transmission of the sacred texts within the realm of Jewish tradition or culture in order to define the inner meaning of both the Hebrew Bible and traditional rabbinic literature, and to explain the significance of Jewish religious observances.

Traditional Kabbalists believe its origins pre-date all religions, forming the primordial underpinnings of not only God's Creation but everything that followed (including the societies and religions of today). Historically, though, Kabbalah emerged from earlier forms of Jewish mysticism around the 12th and 13th centuries in Spain and parts of France. During this period the *Zohar* was published, a series of books that formed the foundational works of Kabbalist literature. In 16th century Safed, Kabbalah underwent a massive revival and reinterpretation (a period of Jewish mystical renaissance) due to several leading Sephardic Kabbalists living there. The most notable was Isaac Luria, a leading rabbi and mystic from the 1500s who is now considered the Father of contemporary Kabbalah; his teachings are referred to as Lurianic Kabbalah. Although his own literary contributions to Kabbalah were limited, Luria's spiritual fame propelled his authority, cementing the veneration of his writings and customs within the Kabbalah school of thought. Later, Lurianic Kabbalah would greatly influence the Hasidic Judaism movement of the 18th century. But the main idea Avraham wanted to impart was that

Kabbalah was the inner spiritual wisdom of Judaism, and at its core is unconditional love.

People who follow or study Kabbalah are striving for a transformation, to become more loving and giving and denouncing hatred in all its forms. He told us that we are all connected, whether we accept this notion or not, and that everything happens for a reason, even bad things. He used the Holocaust as an example of this. For 2,000 years Jews had been praying for a homeland but it took the horrors and displacement caused by the Holocaust to serve as the final catalyst in achieving this aim. His artwork reflects the spiritual concepts of Kabbalah in different ways. Some of his paintings contain the words of Jewish prayers, or have spiritual imagery and shapes, and some very unique paintings artistically depict the 100 sounds blown on a shofar (ram's horn) on Rosh Hashana. After his introduction we were free to browse his gallery and buy his art. I was moved by a simple black and white piece called *Teshuva-Hey* (symbolizing the concept of giving, receiving and oneness). It depicts the letter *hey* (the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet) which is used twice in the name of God. The lower part of the painting has the letter in a black background and refers to our desire to receive. The upper portion of the painting has the letter in a white background and refers to our desire to give. The idea behind the painting is that our divine source is all about giving (love) and not receiving, so moving from the lower letter (in black) to the upper letter (in white) is symbolic of our spiritual transformation to experience the infinite goodness that is the source of all reality, allowing us to attain a deeper level of divine union. This painting now hangs on a wall inside my condo.

After our stop at the *Tzfat Gallery of Mystical Art* we walked through a section of the Old Quarter to visit the Abuhav Synagogue, one of over 30 synagogues in the area, many dating back centuries. A sign on the stone wall along the narrow street in front of the temple explains that the original Abuhav Synagogue was built in the 1500s and named after the notable 14th century Spanish Rabbi and Kabbalist, Yitzhak Abuhav, from Toledo, Spain. Following the expulsions of Jews from the Iberian peninsula in 1492, disciples of Abuhav found their way to Safed carrying a Torah scroll scribed by Abuhav. Tradition has it that Rabbi Abuhav had designed a synagogue while in Spain incorporating Kabbalist symbols. The temple built in his honor supposedly used the rabbi's plans. But the Abuhav Synagogue was destroyed by an earthquake in 1759 and had to be rebuilt. Ironically, the new Abuhav Synagogue was also destroyed by an earthquake in the 1800s, the only part that didn't collapse was the southern wall containing the Ark housing two Torahs, including the one penned by Abuhav. When the synagogue was re-constructed again, this wall became the only remaining section from the original

building. The Abuhav Synagogue holds a significant place in the Jewish history of Safed; the Torah Abuhav wrote is the oldest one in the city and is only taken out on special religious occasions.

The white domed interior of the synagogue is decorated with paintings depicting musical instruments that were once used by the Levite choir (composed of Jewish males from the Tribe of Levi) in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. There are also painted symbols of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and several crowns referring to Mishnaic teachings along the ceiling. The blue *bimah*, a raised, rectangular wooden platform in the center of the synagogue from where the Torah is read, has six steps (representing the six working days of the week, with the platform serving as Saturday, the Sabbath). The Holy Ark along the southern wall is divided into three sections and contain Torah scrolls including the one written by Rabbi Abuhav from the 14th century. When we exited the synagogue I inadvertently left the bag containing the painting I purchased at the Tzfat Gallery of Mystical Art on a bench inside the temple. I didn't even realize I had done this until about ten minutes later and rushed back to the synagogue to retrieve it, hoping no one had taken it. When I rushed in, the group of Orthodox men sitting inside gave me a puzzled look before I explained I had forgotten my painting. The elder of the group just smiled (and probably thought, *'Does this idiot think someone would steal something inside this temple*?').

Alon took us to a gift shop called the Safed Candle Gallery in the Old Quarter to show us some interesting (and amusing) candle statues that are on display throughout the store. All of them were based on characters or stories from the Hebrew Bible. My favorite of the wax statues included the one depicting David slaughtering Goliath, Noah's Ark (filled with animals) and a chess board using rabbis as the chess pieces. Afterwards, we were given an hour and fifteen minutes to have lunch and wander through the Artist Quarter.

Marti, Shaune and I ended up at the Lahuhe Zefat Restaurant, a Yemenite eatery that Alon recommended, which makes delicious sandwiches on a sort of spongy flat bread (called a *lahuhe* or *lahoh*) that originated in Yemen and was introduced to Israel by Yemenite Jewish immigrants. It was like eating a really tasty pita sandwich. I do not recall at this time what was inside, but it was filled with veggies and I believe some kind of grilled meat (maybe chicken). I opted for the spicy sauce which had quite a kick. Afterwards, I wandered through the various galleries and shops of the Artist Quarter. The artwork was incredible. Since the 1950s there has been a thriving artist district in Safed, located in what was once the Arab Quarter of the city prior to the formation of the State of Israel. In addition to

the numerous galleries and art shops, you'll find artists displaying their paintings and sculptures along the narrow streets in this section. The prices were not cheap.

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We rendezvoused on the bus by 1:30pm and left Safed, traveling back down the mountains and crossing the valley eastward towards the Golan Heights. At one point we went over a narrow portion of the Jordan River before ascending up the mountains again on the eastern side of the valley towards the border with Syria. I thought this was pretty cool. We had just left one mountaintop on the western side of the Upper Galilee and were now driving along another mountaintop located on the eastern side of the Upper Galilee. And the views of the valley were spectacular. On the way up the Golan Heights we passed several open fields surrounded by barbed wire with signs admonishing the public to stay clear due to land mines. This area was part of the territory that Israel occupied from Syria after the Six Day War in 1967. We didn't see many settlements in the area. The international community, for the most part, views Israeli settlements here as illegal under international law, but I don't see Israel handing it back any time soon. I think this stretch of land serves as a kind of buffer zone between the two countries. We actually saw Israeli military personnel nearby who probably keep a close eye on their belligerent neighbor. We stopped at an observation point some 3,300 feet (1,005m) above the valley to get a view of Syria across the border. All we could see from this vantage point, though, was a panoramic view of farmlands and one small Syrian village near the base of the mountains. I had assumed there would be a Syrian military base on the other side but it was pretty tranquil and serene.

While we were at the observation point, Alon gave us a brief summary of the threats that Israel faces outside its borders. So as not to make this journal too political (or sensitive), I've decided not to include most of what he said. Not because he said something wrong, mind you. He was speaking as a proud Israeli, and his explanations were solidly rooted in the very *real* threats his country encounters on a regular basis. That being so, there is always another side of the coin when it comes to this region of the world, and I will try to address my thoughts on the matter later in this journal. Alon generally went over the origins of some of the key militant (or terrorist) groups that have risen up in the last four decades that are currently fighting the State of Israel. He mentioned the list of countries in the region that either support these militants and/or have their own antagonistic agenda against the country. The list is a long one, my friends. And,

sadly, with the devastation caused by the Hamas-Israeli War, I can only imagine this list will continue to grow in the future.

He also talked about Israeli attitudes towards America, or more precisely, American politics. Alon said most Israelis tend to judge American presidents by how much they support Israel. For example, Obama was not particularly liked because of the nuclear deal his administration made with Iran (a sworn enemy of Israel). On the other hand, Trump – regardless of his buffoonery – was very well liked because his administration unexpectedly recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the country (a decision that was not popular around the world). The verdict, he told us, was still out on President Biden. At the time I was in Israel it was still five months away from the Hamas-Israel War and Biden had refused to meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu over his conservative government's judicial overhaul, which seemed to be dividing the Israeli nation. This was seen as a snub of the government's leadership. But since the Hamas-Israeli War the Biden administration, while voicing many concerns over the amount of innocent casualties, has continued to supply Israel with military and other types of aid. So, who knows?

From the observation point we drove to the Bahat Winery (and Restaurant) nestled in a picturesque little kibbutz called Ein Zivan in the Northern Golan Heights. Housed in a former sandals factory, this family-owned boutique winery only produces around 20,000 bottles of wine per year. The vineyards are located somewhere in the valley below. When we arrived the owners put out a lovely cheese spread and several bottles of different wines for us to sample. We were given a brief tour of where the wine is processed, barreled and bottled. What I found interesting is that many of their workers were foreigners. I do not drink alcohol anymore so I cannot comment on the quality of their wines. The cheese was great, though. After our winery visit we returned to our hotel. We got back just after 5:00pm and what I needed urgently was an espresso. I spent the next two hours writing in my journal and sending photos to family and friends back home before proceeding to the dining hall for dinner. Earlier that day several tour groups had checked in and the dining area was packed. After dinner I took a stroll around the hotel grounds. In my room I relaxed on the balcony while texting some friends. I tried watching TV later on but was too tired and went to bed by 10:00pm.

Day Seven

I was awake by 3:30am. Unable to go back to sleep I performed my travel exercise routine, taking a longer time to stretch, before shaving and showering. I repacked my luggage and then sat down to watch the international news on TV before heading to the dining hall for breakfast. By 9:15am we were on the coach for what would be the longest bus ride of the tour. Our next destination was a resort in the Dead Sea area located approximately 270 kilometers (about 168 miles) to the south. Along the way we made some interesting stops.

From the Upper Galilee we drove south on Highway 90 and made our way along the western rim of the Sea of Galilee, driving though a section of the ancient city of Tiberias. Since the 16th century Tiberias has been identified as one of the four holiest cities in Judaism. Founded in the year 20 BC by King Herod and named in honor of Tiberius, the reigning Roman emperor of the time, the city has long been considered an important political and religious hub for Jews living in 'the land of Israel', especially after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Much of the *Mishna* (the first major written collection of the Jewish oral tradition) and the *Jerusalem Talmud* (also known as the Talmud of the Land of Israel) were comprised in Tiberias. During the period of the British Mandate the city was a mixed city, but during the civil war leading up to the formation of the State of Israel all of the Arabs were evacuated. Tiberias' population today is overwhelmingly Jewish. The city is also an important pilgrimage site for both Jews and Christians, and just to its south is the Hamat Tiberias National Park, home to famed mineral hot springs dating back to Antiquity.

As we approached Tiberias someone on the bus asked Alon an interesting question. What do Jewish people think about Christians? He reflected for a moment before answering. He told us there are basically four fundamental attitudes that govern how Jews view Christians. I'm assuming he was referring to Israeli Jews but perhaps his opinion is shared universally among the world's Jewish population. I am not a Jew, so I wouldn't really know. The first type of attitude is driven by ignorance; this type of Jew has no real contact with Christians and/or doesn't understand Jesus or Christianity. Which I think is common for most people, regardless of their religious affiliation. I'm certain most Christians are not familiar enough with Buddhism, Islam or Judaism to make informed opinions about those faiths. The second type of attitude Jews may have towards Christians is rooted in animosity, he said. And this stems from the centuries of persecutions

Jewish people have had to endure at the hands of Christians. Millions of Jews have been killed, imprisoned, stripped of their wealth and status and forced into exile in the name of Christianity. In fact, the murder of so many Jews by the Nazis during WWII was the final driving factor that led to the creation of the State of Israel. A third attitude Jews may have towards Christians is a scholarly one, based on the knowledge of its history, and that Jesus was a Jew and considered a rabbi or sage during his time. And the fourth, and most intriguing to me, is the attitude of Jewish people who have accepted Jesus as the Messiah but do not follow the Christian faith. *Hmmmm*.

Approximately 20 minutes after passing Tiberias we reached the first stop of the day, the Yardenit Baptismal Site. Situated along the River Jordan, just to the south of the river's outlet from the Sea of Galilee, this baptism site has become quite popular among Christian pilgrims who wish to baptize themselves in the same river where Jesus was baptized. But this is not the actual spot of Jesus' baptism, although the site would have you believe that. According to *Matthew 3:13-17* in the bible, Jesus was baptized in Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan (Al-Maghtas) which is located inside Jordan just north of the Dead Sea across from Jericho. I actually visited the real baptismal site in 2016 while doing a tour of Jordan. The Yardenit Baptismal Site, on the other hand, is part of the nearby Kibbutz Kinneret which owns and also manages the site. As you approach the river from the parking lot there is a tiled wall leading up to the entrance with a quote from the bible (*Mark 1, 1-9*) in various languages. This quote describes the baptism of Jesus. Several sections along the western side of the River Jordan have platforms from where Christians can dip into the water. When we visited there were two groups of Christians, one from the U.S. and one from Brazil, being baptized in the river to much cheering and jubilation. The facility provides changing rooms for this service. We spent approximately 30 minutes here, some of us dipping our feet or hands in the river. The site has a fairly large religious souvenir shop (run by an order of nuns) and I was able to purchase two locally-made crucifix necklaces as gifts for some of the more devout members of my family back home.

Just before 9:00am we were back on the bus heading further south along Highway 90. Leaving the baptismal site we passed the Degania Alef Kibbutz, which was founded in 1909-10 and is considered to be the first *kvutza*-type agricultural settlement established in Israel by Zionist pioneers. A *kvutza* differed from a kibbutz in that it tended to be smaller and almost entirely agriculturally based, whereas a kibbutz could expand beyond agriculture to pursue other types of business ventures. I believe the word 'kibbutz' is now uniformly used to describe all of these types of former Zionist settlements. The Degania Alef Kibbutz is

located on the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee where it meets the River Jordan. As we drove past it Alon told us that at one point in its early history, Israel relied heavily on the Sea of Galilee for its drinking water. Rain falls mostly in the winter and primarily in the northern part of the country, so irrigation and water engineering are crucial to Israel's economic survival and growth. Large scale projects have been undertaken over the last several decades, from re-directing reservoirs and river flows in the northern parts of the country to desalinating sea water and recapturing flood and wastewater. Today, according to Alon, almost 90 percent of Israel's drinking water comes from desalination and recycled water.

During our drive, Alon answered a question from the group concerning the street protests we'd been encountering throughout the tour. In the weeks leading up to this trip, and during the entire time we were in the country, Israelis by the thousands (and tens of thousands) had been protesting a proposed plan by Netanyahu's hardline government to implement judicial reforms. The issue was polarizing the country and we wanted to know why. Alon told us the role of the Supreme Court in Israel is essentially two-fold. The first, the court serves as the final level of judicial appeal. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the court serves as a 'checks and balances' on the government, determining if someone's rights have been violated or if a particular law is illegal. This is a crucial function considering that Israel has no written constitution. Instead, the country has a list of *Basic Laws* fashioned on the individual liberties originally outlined in the Israeli Declaration of Independence of 1948.

The Supreme Court has fifteen members who are appointed by the President of Israel upon nomination by the Judicial Selection Committee. This committee is currently made up of nine members: two cabinet ministers, two Knesset members, two representatives of the Israeli Bar Association, and three members of the Supreme Court, including the Chief Justice and two other justices who are rotated every three years. According to Alon, it takes 7 out of the 9 votes on the Judicial Selection Committee to get nominated. Once on the court, the justices serve until the mandatory age of 70, but even after they retire the justices usually continue to perform in some kind of advisory role on legal issues. So what is the problem then? Over the years the court has intervened, even when it's been unpopular to do so, to overturn laws or actions by the government deemed in violation of a person's rights under the Basic Laws of Israel. In a country that is continuously threatened by internal and external forces, and with the important roles the military and the intelligence apparatus play in its survival, it is essential to have an independent Supreme Court to safeguard civil liberties, which can often be trampled under the

banner of 'homeland security' or, as is the case here, when a political party (and its coalition) tries to enforce its agenda on the rest of the country *at any cost*.

In 2019, Prime Minister Netanyahu was indicted on bribery and fraud charges. Five years later the man is still in office awaiting the outcome of those allegations. Following the Knesset elections in 2022, Netanyahu's conservative Likud party formed a political coalition with several far-right, ultra-nationalist religious groups creating the most right-wing government Israel has ever seen. Almost immediately this new government announced it would take measures to counter what it claimed was the growing influence of the judicial system. And by this they meant the Supreme Court's power to overrule the government. The reforms Netanyahu's political allies want to implement include a law that would supersede any Supreme Court ruling with a simple majority in the Knesset (the country's parliament), which Netanyahu's coalition currently controls. *How convenient would that be*? Considering that Netanyahu is under indictment, and the Supreme Court would be his final court of appeals, one could easily see a conflict of interest here. But it's not just about Netanyahu's personal fortunes or overriding the court's decisions, the government wants to add more members to the Judicial Selection Committee to have more control over the selection process of new justices, and they also want the ministers to be able to disregard legal advice whenever they deem it necessary to carry out their duties. In essence, the judicial system could become a moot court in which the only thing that matters are the laws and rulings of the current government in power. *This is how totalitarian governments are structured*. And this is why so many Israelis are protesting the proposed changes to the country's judiciary. If there are no checks and balances within a democracy, then the 'democracy' exists in name only. So, kudos to the Israelis who are protesting this attempt to undermine the court system.

We continued south along Highway 90, driving through the Jordan Valley with the country of Jordan and its mountains to our left. Approximately 27 kilometers south of the Sea of Galilee we turned west onto Highway 71 and drove through the Harod Valley, a wide agricultural plain that borders the eastern boundary of the historic Jezreel Valley. In the Hebrew bible, the Jezreel Valley was the site of several important battles with the Israelites, including the Battle of Megiddo in which the forces of Egyptian Pharoah Thutmose III routed the Canaanites in the 15th century BC. For Christians, in the Book of Revelations, the Jezreel Valley is important in that it is the prophesied location of the final battle (*Armageddon*) that will take place between the forces of good and evil during the End Times. Today, this fertile valley, separating the hills of Galilee from those of Samaria, is

cultivated by multiple cooperative communities (kibbutzim and moshavim) forming the country's richest agricultural region.

We drove for about 15 minutes on Highway 71 before making a U-turn across the fertile plains of the Harod Valley – which forms a transitional zone between the Jezreel Valley in the east and the Beit She'an Valley in the west – in order to reach our next stop, the Bet Alfa Antiquities National Park. The park lies at the foot of the northern slopes of Mount Gilboa, a mountain range which overlooks the valley. Its main attraction is the Beit Alpha Synagogue, a 6th century temple that was unearthed by members of the nearby Kibbutz Heftzibah in 1928 while digging a new irrigation channel. Excavation of the site began in 1929 under the direction of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem led by Israeli archaeologist, Eleazer Sukenik. Over the years additional excavation work has been carried out on the structure and surrounding dwellings.

According to informational boards at the site, the synagogue was constructed during the reign of Roman Emperor Justinian I in the early part of the 6th century. Very little is known about the Jewish community that built the temple other than what can be gleaned from dedicatory inscriptions left at the site. An Aramaic inscription on the structure's mosaic floor details the period when the temple was built and that it was funded by communal donations. A Greek inscription gives praise to two artisans, Marianos and his son Hanina, who were apparently instrumental in getting the temple built. The village of this ancient Jewish community was destroyed by an earthquake towards the end of the 1500s, so not much is known about its former inhabitants. Architectural remains of the synagogue indicate the temple was a two-story basilica-style building containing a courtyard, vestibule and prayer hall. It's interesting to note that Jews were a minority in the area during this time and the temple resembled a Christian church rather than a typical synagogue. A scale model of the temple is on display to show what it actually looked like. The first floor of the temple consisted of a central nave almost 18 feet wide; the apse was where the Torah Ark was placed, facing in the direction of Jerusalem. Sections of the temple have been reconstructed, the whole thing enclosed and air-conditioned. When you enter the temple enclosure you stand along its edges looking down into the nave and watch a short film explaining how the temple came to be. The most striking thing about the structure is the nave's mosaic floor, which has been *remarkably* preserved.

The mosaic floor is divided into three distinct panels. The northern panel depicts a scene from the "Binding of Isaac" (from the Book of Genesis) when God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son. The scene portrays Abraham ready to slay

his son over a fiery altar while the 'hand' of God intervenes to stop the killing of the boy and instead instructs Abraham to sacrifice a nearby ram. Most of the figures in this panel are identified with Hebrew labels. Scholars are not sure exactly what the iconographic significance of this panel is intended to convey. Was it God's mercy? Or perhaps it symbolized God's continuing covenant with Israel? The southern mosaic panel is a liturgically-oriented scene emphasizing the centrality of the Torah Shrine. In this scene the Torah Shrine stands in the center of the composition under a gabled roof decorated with ornamental panels. The Torah Shrine is flanked by two roaring lions, two large menorahs and several Jewish ritual objects (such as a shofar and an incense shovel). But the most interesting and intriguing mosaic panel found in this 6th century synagogue is the central panel. It is larger than the other two and depicts the Wheel of the Zodiac, which originated as Roman art and can be seen in several synagogues in Israel from this time period. Once again, scholars are not certain why the Zodiac Wheel was found inside the temple. An informational board at the site suggests the inclusion of the Zodiac design was merely decorative (to the times), but some scholars argue that its presence is seen as evidence of the Judaization and adaptation of the Zodiac into the Jewish calendar and liturgy, while others argue it represents a mystical or Hellenistic form of Judaism that may have embraced some of the astral religious tenets of Greco-Roman culture. Either way, it was rather unusual to see the Wheel of the Zodiac inside a Jewish temple.

We spent almost an hour at the site before reboarding the bus and heading east for approximately 15 kilometers to visit the Roman-Byzantine ruins of Beit She'an, one of the oldest cities in the region. Situated at the junction of the Jordan River Valley and the Jezreel Valley, Beit She'an was an important 'crossroad' settlement that dates back to the Chalcolithic Period (4,000 to 2,000 BC). During the Late Bronze Age, when the region came under Imperial Egyptian rule, Beit She'an became an important administrative center, a position it would continue to hold throughout the Hellenistic Period and the Roman rule that followed. The city was named Scythopolis and became the most important of Rome's *Decapolis*, the ten Hellenistic cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in the Levant. This was also the only Roman city on the west bank of the Jordan River. Over the centuries it grew, spurred on by Roman culture, fashion and influenced by the later proliferation of Christianity. Its decline occurred following the Arab conquest of the Levant (between 633 – 640 AD) and facilitated by regional earthquakes that eventually reduced the city to a medium-sized country town by the 8th century.

Today, the excavated remains of Scythopolis are preserved within the Beit She'an National Park located in the northcentral part of the city. I was blown-away

by the size of the excavation, which can rival that of *Ephesus* in Turkey. When we entered the site, along an elevated section on its southern side, Alon had us stand around a scale model of the walled ancient city to explain how its streets and more famous structures were laid out. From this vantage point we had a panoramic view of the entire excavated area of this once great Hellenistic city. Although most of it was a seemingly hodge-podge collection of ruins you could clearly make out the main street (the Cardo Maximus) and some important and reconstructed buildings (like the Roman bathhouse and the Roman amphitheater).

We made our way down into the ruins and visited the bathhouse first, which has been partially restored. It consisted of several buildings covering an area of 8,500 square meters and was actually the *smaller* of two bathhouses found in the town center. According to an informational sign at the site this bathhouse was built in the 4th century AD and was in operation for nearly 200 years, undergoing periodic renovations and alterations. The bathhouse compound included a swimming pool, massage rooms, public latrines and other conveniences, and the bath halls. The first section we entered was an open courtyard containing a pool. The area had mosaic tiles on the floor and was surrounded by stone columns.

Inside the bathhouse we saw the remains of the hot rooms that functioned either as a sauna or steam room. Large cauldrons provided the vapors for steam and beneath the hot rooms were little brick towers that supported the floor, creating a space in which heated air or steam, generated by large furnaces outside of the bathhouse, circulated through the walls and floor. *Pretty clever*. Illustrated signs posted in the hot rooms explained the process of using a bathhouse back in those times, which played an important role in Roman social life. The entry fees were affordable for everyone, and the bathhouse served as a meeting place for friends and business acquaintances. Visitors would first remove their clothes in a changing room and then perform some kind of exercise – like wrestling or weight-lifting – in the courtyard area. Afterwards, they sat in the steam room working up a sweat before relaxing in a pool of warm water. Soap hadn't been invented yet. To clean their bodies they would apply oil and then wipe it off with a special stick called a *strigil*. The final process was to take a plunge into a cold-water pool to close the pores of the skin. In addition to the baths, visitors could avail themselves of the services of a barber or a masseuse. It was like the equivalent of a modern-day spa facility. And for the intellectually-minded, the bathhouse also provided scholarly lectures and symposia.

From the bathhouse we walked to the Cardo Maximus, the main north-south orientated street of any Roman city. This particular avenue was called Palladius

Street (according to a posted sign). Along its edges were Roman columns and what appeared to be the remains of a wide pavement decorated with mosaic tiles on either side of the street. In every from Palladius Street were partially-excavated mounds and outlines of other buildings, attesting to the size of this former ancient city. From here we headed over to the partially reconstructed Roman amphitheater. Alon told us the amphitheater could seat 7,000 spectators. It is considered the best-preserved ancient theater in Israel. I climbed to the top row to take pictures. The back wall of the stage, known as the scaena-frons, was missing, allowing for some excellent photographs of the main street (and the rest of the city) from the amphitheater.

After touring the ruins we stopped to have lunch in a busy restaurant in Beit She'an. Most of us opted for the chicken schnitzel pita sandwich that Alon recommended. While we were eating a most unusual thing happened. A bird had set up a nest along one corner of the dining room ceiling and kept flying inside to feed its five hungry chicks. I guess that's how you know you're in a quality food joint when even the wildlife frequents the place! By 1:30pm we left Beit She'an and continued driving south on Highway 90 towards the day's final destination: the Dead Sea area. The drive took just over two hours; the whole time the border of Jordan was to our left. We were traveling now through the territory of the West Bank, the scenery changing rapidly the further south we went. The fertile plains we saw earlier gave way to barren hills and desert terrain. It made me wonder how safe this area of the country was for tourists. It seemed awfully isolated.

The West Bank is the larger of the two Palestinian Territories (the other is the Gaza Strip). It is a land-locked region bordered by Jordan to the east and everywhere else by the country of Israel. The territory was formed after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and was subsequently annexed by Jordan. But during the Sixth Day War in 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and has, for all intents and purposes, controlled the territory ever since. Many in the international community view Israel's occupation of the West Bank as illegal. In the 1990s the Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into three regional levels (areas A, B and C). Areas A and B are solely or partially administered by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), while Area C, which makes up roughly 60 percent of the West Bank, is administered directly by Israel. The Oslo Accords were considered a path to the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state, but in the ensuing years the two sides have drifted further apart as more and more Israeli settlements have emerged in the West Bank in what many argue is a clear violation of international law. Because the West Bank is envisioned as the heart of the Palestinian's future state, its occupation by Israel, and the growing number of Israeli settlements, remains the

central issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The West Bank measures 5,640 square kilometers and has a population of over 3.3 million of which almost 700,000 are Israeli settlers. Many right-wing Israeli nationalists view the West Bank (and its numerous biblical sites) as part of their ancestral homeland. Many of these Israelis would love to see the West Bank annexed into the State of Israel. And I believe this is the *real* issue at hand. The animosity between Palestinians and Israelis is so great now that I do not think Israel has any intention of ever ceding the entire West Bank for a future Palestinian homeland. At least not without more violence and/or diplomatic pressure. Perhaps the two sides will eventually tire of the bloodshed and turmoil and come to some agreement. But I'm not holding my breath, folks.

This brings up a related topic that Alon discussed on the bus ride. He said Jews outside of Israel are often asked '*Do you support the State of Israel*?' Alon acknowledged that this is a thorny issue for some Jews, especially liberal ones living in well-established democracies. Not all Jewish people worldwide support Netanyahu's right-wing government. And there are many secular Jews who do not care for the religious fervor of the ultra-Orthodox followers. So how does one reconcile these varying viewpoints? According to Alon, the question of supporting the State of Israel is not based on whether one likes the current government or even Judaism itself, but rather if one supports the notion of the country's right to *exist*. Framed in this manner, the question is akin to asking an American if the United States, which took its land violently from native Americans, now has the right to exist. Most people would argue that, yeah, native Americans got a bum deal, but…hey, what can you do? *I mean, we're here and we're not going anywhere*. The State of Israel is now 76 years old and, regardless of the truly sad and unjust state of the Palestinian people, it has *earned* the right to exist.

Many of today's modern countries were forged through violent acquisition and overtly racist policies before they eventually developed into relatively peaceful, civilized societies. Case in point, it took the United States almost 100 years before it emancipated slaves, and even longer before giving women the right to vote. I realize that as an outsider I don't have the right to pass judgement on the State of Israel concerning its dealing with Palestinians. It would be recklessly naïve to assume that outsiders could force Israelis and Palestinians to co-exist peacefully, especially when so many outsiders (read: regional powers) have their own separate agenda for the region. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be sorted out between the two groups if there is to be lasting peace. When both sides get tired of the violence, the insecurity and the turmoil, then maybe an honest accord can finally be reached. I would argue, though, as someone who recently traveled through the

country that the stark disparity between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs (or Palestinians) was very clear to me, as it is to the rest of the world. I hope Israelis don't become so hardened in their anger towards Palestinians that they lose *all* sense of empathy towards them. After all, Palestinians today, and for quite some time now, have been forced to live in segregated communities as second-class citizens without a homeland to feel safe and secure in. Few countries (including Arab ones) are willing to take them in. A dire situation that results in dire consequences. If I am not mistaken, was this not the plight of many of the Zionists who went to the Levant to create the State of Israel? Weren't Jews tired of being forced to live in ghettoes, as second-class citizens, who were discriminated against and unwanted in many countries, who died in large numbers because of others' ignorant animosity towards their customs and religious beliefs? I see a lot of common ground between these two groups. Unfortunately, hatred, distrust and vengeance has clouded the real issues here. But what do I know, I'm just a retired traveling mailman…

By 2:30pm we had reached the northern tip of the Dead Sea near Kalia Beach, roughly 11 miles past the biblical city of Jericho, the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. According to Alon, Jericho was first settled 11,000 years ago. *Whoa*. We continued driving on Highway 90 along the western shoreline of the Dead Sea. To our right was the Judaean Desert, a rather unforgiving-looking parcel of land that stretches eastward from Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. Located within the Jordan Rift Valley, the Dead Sea is actually a salt lake that borders Jordan to the east and Israel and the West Bank to the west. The lake's main northern basin measures 50 kilometers (31 miles) long and 15 kilometers (9 miles) wide at its widest point. An interesting fact about the Dead Sea is that its surface is 430.5 kilometers (1,412 ft) below sea level, making this area the lowest land-based elevation in the world. And at a maximum depth of 304 kilometers (997 ft) it is also the deepest salt lake on earth. The salinity of the water (34 percent) makes it almost ten times saltier than the ocean. Plants and animals cannot survive in such a salty environment, hence the name *Dead Sea*. Because of the density of the water you cannot sink in this lake. Instead, you'll float like a piece of cork, which is one of its most appealing traits. Tourists have been coming to the Dead Sea area for thousands of years to float in its waters and avail themselves of its therapeutic properties.

Alon told us the Dead Sea is rapidly receding and is in danger of disappearing completely in the not-too-distant future if nothing is done to replenish its water supply. In 1930, its surface area was 1,050 sq km (or 410 sq miles) but today it has shrunk to 605 sq km (or 234 sq miles). The problem is that much of its water

source has either been drying up or has been diverted for other purposes. In addition to rainfall and groundwater seepage, water flows into the Dead Sea from different sources, primarily the Jordan River and a system of smaller streams and underground springs within the Jordan Valley. Many streams have now been diverted for water usage by both Israel and Jordan. At one time the River Jordan was the main supplier of water to its northern basin, but irrigation projects further north near the Sea of Galilee have substantially reduced its contribution to less than what is accumulated yearly through rainfall. If the Dead Sea continues to recede at its current level, it is possible the lake will dry out completely in the coming decades.

I had visited the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea in 2016 and was shocked to see how much the lake had receded in just seven years. Back then my Jordanian guide told us that efforts were underway to channel water back into the lake from different sources, including the Mediterranean Sea, but I read online that several of these restoration projects have since been cancelled or abandoned (probably due to costs or engineering considerations). Another problem that is occurring as a result of the lake drying out is the formation of large sinkholes. When we reached Ein Gedi, a small kibbutz on the western shore of the Dead Sea, we had to make a detour because an enormous sinkhole had swallowed up a section of the highway, making it unpassable. This is an ongoing problem affecting the entire area around the quickly evaporating lake. Over the years, these sinkholes have caused significant damage to infrastructure and businesses in both Israel and Jordan.

We reached our hotel, the ritzy Nevo Isrotel Dead Sea Spa and Resort, shortly before 3:30pm and quickly checked into our rooms so we could enjoy the waters of the Dead Sea before nightfall. The hotel was situated alongside the shoreline in a resort district called Ein Bokek which features several other fancy hotels. The entire group – donned in swimwear and bathrobes – gathered in the lobby twenty minutes later and proceeded to the beach area for a dip in the Dead Sea. I made the mistake of wearing my water shoes. The high salinity of the lake ate right through the glue lining of the shoes causing them to split open. The water level was pretty low around the beach area, but we didn't need much depth to start floating. No sooner than I leaned back my feet popped up from underneath me, making me bob on the surface. I had already experienced this when I visited Jordan, but the sensation was just as fun now as it was back then. Jerry decided not to go into the lake (I think due to a concern over bacteria levels) and was nice enough to take the group's picture as we bobbed in the water. After about 15 minutes I headed over to the hotel's spa area where they had an indoor pool filled with water from the Dead Sea with some added minerals. I soaked and bobbed in this pool for another 10

minutes before showering off and sitting in one of the Jacuzzis to sooth my muscles. I finished off with a visit to the sauna and then went back up to my room by 5:45pm to take another shower and put on some clean clothes.

I was sending family and friends back home daily photos and text messages of the trip on WhatsApp and got a little distracted. When I checked the time it was already 8:00pm and I quickly went down to the hotel restaurant for an included dinner buffet that was out of this world. All of the members of my group had already eaten by then and I had to sit by myself. Looking around the restaurant I noticed a lot of wealthy-looking Israelis and Arabs. It made me feel a little self-conscious to be dressed in a simple black T-shirt and jeans…but, hey, that didn't stop me from revisiting the food stations. Nothing soothes the mind and soul like a refillable plate of delicious food. I wobbled back to my room by 9:00pm and was fast asleep 45 minutes later.

Day Eight

I woke up at 4:00am. Over a cup of instant coffee I wrote in my journal for an hour before performing my travel exercises and jumping into the shower. I then took stock of my remaining clean clothes. Years of guided touring has made me the consummate packer; only once did I need to wash clothes on a tour because I ran out of things to wear, and that was when my luggage was lost due to an airline strike. But as I sorted through my clothes it dawned on me I would be short one clean shirt by the end of the trip. Because I had booked my flight with El Al Airlines, which doesn't depart on Saturdays due to the Sabbath, I ended up with an additional day in Jerusalem at the end of the tour and had miscalculated the amount of clothes I needed to bring. So I made a mental note to hand wash one of my used T-shirts later that evening. By 7:15am I placed my luggage outside my room for the porter and proceeded downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

At 8:30am we were on the bus heading north on Highway 90 to visit Masada National Park located 18 kilometers (roughly 11 miles) from our hotel. It took us 20 minutes to reach the site. This park is one of Israel's most popular tourist attractions, drawing some 750,000 people annually. The significance of Masada

lies in the ruins of an ancient cliff-top fortress built by King Herod between 37 and 31 BC. The fortress was constructed on top of a flat, mesa-like plateau (known as a *horst*) and was originally surrounded by a tall defensive wall reinforced by many guard towers. King Herod built the fortress as a refuge in case of a revolt against his rule. Its location on top of a cliff provided natural barriers to any approaching army; namely, its steep elevations. For example, on its eastern side the cliff drops 400 meters (1,300 ft) while on its western side there is a 90 meter (300 ft) drop. The fortress – situated on the eastern edge of the Judaean Desert – overlooks not only the Dead Sea but pretty much everything else for miles around, making a surprise attack back then virtually impossible. Its high elevation meant the only way to conquer the fortress would be through a protracted siege. And even then, King Herod constructed storage rooms capable of stockpiling supplies to sustain several thousand people in case of such an event. I have seen many hilltop or elevated fortresses in my travels thus far and this one was quite unique, even in its ruined state. In 2001, Masada was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site (making it a popular tourism draw in the process).

We pulled up to the entrance by 8:50am. According to Alon it was best to see the site early in the morning to avoid the hot sun. There is very little shade once you get to the top of the cliff (or for that matter anywhere else in the area). Visitors can access the fortress ruins in two ways. The first is to take one of two hiking trails to the top. The *Snake Path* (which was the original passageway to the fortress) originates next to the Masada Museum near the entrance area and winds its way up the rocky terrain covering 301 meters (or 988 ft) of elevation. The second trail is the Roman Ramp located on the western side of the fortress that is also pretty steep but has less elevation. Either trail I would imagine is a daunting hike in the desert sun, which is why the site encourages hikers to set out very early in the morning and bring plenty of water. In the summer, during excessive heat days, the trails are closed. People have actually died hiking to the top. The other way one can reach the fortress is by taking a cable car. There is a fee associated with entering the park and an additional (more expensive) fee if you plan to use the cable car. I checked the park's website and they recommend making reservations because they limit the number of daily visitors to preserve the ruins.

Upon entering the site at the bottom of the cliff we watched a short film on the *Siege of Masada,* one of the last battles fought during the First Jewish-Roman War. We then took the cable car to the fortress ruins. The scenery on the way up reminded me of the canyons of Arizona. We could see visitors hiking along the Snake Path beneath us; my hat went off to them. We entered the ruins along the northeastern side next to the Northern Complex, where King Herod built himself a

palace on the very edge of the cliff overlooking the Dead Sea. This was apparently the grander of two palaces the king built for himself on top of the cliff; another palace (the Western Palace) was constructed on the site's western boundary. As is the case when visiting most archaeological ruins one needs to use a little imagination (or a guide) to understand just what you're actually looking at. For nearly 19 centuries the ruins of Masada were left undisturbed until the site was officially 'discovered' in 1838, but it wasn't until the early 1960s that the area was extensively excavated. Since then, many of Masada's structures have been partially restored from the original remains. Another important aspect of this particular archaeological site are its killer views in every direction from atop the cliff.

Alon led us through the Northern Complex. We passed a quarry section and then walked by the commandant's headquarters and residence. This was situated in front of the Northern Palace (and, I'm assuming, was the guardhouse protecting the palace). Beyond this were the storeroom complex where supplies and provisions were kept. According to Alon, the storerooms could hold enough food to feed thousands for a year or longer but was primarily used by the king, his entourage and his garrison. King Herod was a converted Jew and was viewed suspiciously by the Jewish subjects he ruled over. His paranoia about being overthrown led him to build this towering fortress, which he viewed as a safe refuge in case of a revolt. His storerooms would allow him to ride out a rebellion or protracted siege in comfort. Although, in his case, it never came down to that. Beyond the storerooms we walked past the ruins of a large bathhouse and then stood on the northern edge of the site looking down onto the Northern Palace which was constructed along three terraces that descended the northern ridge of the cliff. This included the living quarters of King Herod.

From the Northern Complex we made our way through the western section of the site. We saw one of the two underground cisterns used by the fortress to collect water. My initial reaction was to ask where did they get water from? I mean, the Dead Sea was undrinkable and everywhere you looked for miles around there was nothing but dry, desert terrain. Alon took us to the western edges of the site and showed us a series of channels that had been dug into the sides of the cliff that led up into the surrounding mountain. These channels trapped rainwater and funneled it to pools dug beneath the fortress. It is believed the collected water was then transported up the cliffside to the cisterns via laborers and/or donkeys. The cisterns could hold up to 40,000 cubic feet of water, sustaining a large number of people for a very long time between rainfalls. *Very clever.*

We entered a structure that was used as a stable but later converted into a synagogue by Jewish rebels during the *Siege of Masada*. It is now considered one of the oldest synagogues in Israel. A bit further down we came across the Columbarium Towers. A columbarium, also known as a *dovecote,* has niches used to house pigeons and doves. It is believed the columbarium found in Masada (there were three of them in all) were used to provide not only fresh meat (from the pigeons) but also as a source of fertilizer (from the bird droppings) for crops grown inside the fortress. Nearby, just to the north of the Western Palace Complex, we came upon the breaching point along the defensive walls where the Romans were able to break through and enter the fortress, ending the Siege of Masada. Looking down from the cliff we could see several excavations of the Roman legion encampments that had been set up around the hilltop during the siege. Afterwards, we took a seat in the only shady area inside a courtyard of the Western Palace complex so that Alon could tell us the legendary story of the Siege of Masada:

The siege is cloaked in the same kind of folklore retelling that makes the Battle of the Alamo famous. It was one of the final events that ended the First Jewish-Roman War. An entire Roman legion surrounded the fortress of Masada, which was holding over 900 Jewish rebels, and laid siege to it before eventually breaking through one of the walls on its western side. Once inside the fortress, the Roman soldiers encountered a scene of mass death. Rather than be killed by the Romans, or taken prisoners and turned into slaves, almost all of the Jewish rebels and their family members had committed suicide. This *last stand* has cemented the legacy of Masada in the Israeli history books and is remembered now in the same vein that Texans might 'Remember the Alamo'. But there is more to this story than meets the eye.

Alon explained the circumstances leading up to the siege. King Herod was a vassal king of the Roman Empire who was allowed to run his kingdom in a semi-independent manner due to his allegiance to Rome. And while Herod was seen as a great builder and strong ruler, he was also a ruthless tyrant whose policies created a lot of economic hardships for the laboring class. Following his death in 6 AD, economic riots soon broke out that threatened the stability of the region. Without a strong leader in place, Rome decided to officially merge Judea into the Roman Empire. This act increased tensions between Jews and Romans and sparked occasional uprisings, which, over the ensuing decades, would eventually lead to the outbreak of the First Jewish-Roman War in 66 AD.

The revolt began during the infamous reign of Roman Emperor Nero. Sixty years after the death of King Herod the socio-economic situation in Jerusalem had

reached a boiling point. The Roman governors grew exceptionally oppressive towards the population. The disparity between the wealthy and the masses was growing and glaring. Religious tensions had been building for decades. In 64 AD, all of this finally came to a head when the Roman governor of Judea entered the Second Temple (considered the holiest site in Judaism) and seized monies from the temple treasury to pay for Roman taxes. This prompted widespread rebellion throughout Jerusalem, which wasn't unusual. Small uprisings or riots had occurred in the past whenever the temple's treasury was raided. But this time the Jewish reaction was markedly different due to the increasingly tense situation between the governed and their rulers. When rioting erupted in the city, groups of Jerusalemites armed themselves in self-defense. This would give rise to armed Jewish factions (known as the *Zealots*) led by charismatic leaders who eventually took control of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. Throughout this time there was also internal discord within the Jewish population in Jerusalem over how to deal with the Romans. Younger, more radical Jewish priests advocated removing all foreigners from the city, while the elders cautioned for more diplomacy fearful of Rome's response. This resulted in brutal internecine warfare among the Jews themselves, leading to civil unrest and a huge loss of life.

As chaos ensued, Jewish rebels targeted Romans and their sympathizers. But there were splinter factions within the rebel ranks. In 66 AD, one small extremist Jewish rebel faction known as the *Sicarii* were able to overtake the garrison at Masada and claimed it for their own. The term *sicarii* refers to the daggers these men used that were often concealed in their cloaks. The Sicarii were skilled assassins, raiders and kidnappers who targeted both Romans and Jewish groups they opposed. In one incident they murdered over 700 Jews in the village of Ein Gedi. And while they were feared and utterly ruthless, somehow their final stand against the Romans at Masada has spun them in a new historical light as revolutionary martyrs. Either way, these were some tough Jews.

The First Jewish-Roman War began in earnest in 66AD. As unrest spread all over Judaea, the Roman legate in Syria led an entire legion (consisting of over 30,000 soldiers and auxiliary support) into the region to suppress the Jewish rebellion. Initially, this Roman legion was able to quell and take over several key cities controlled by the rebels before marching on Jerusalem. But resistance in Jerusalem must have been formidable as the Roman legion decided to make a tactical retreat to the coast. As they were retreating, a large rebel force ambushed them near the passage of Beth Heron. The legion suffered massive casualties, losing more than 6,000 soldiers and forcing it to flee in disarray leaving behind most of their heavy and prized weaponry. This was one of the worst military

defeats in the history of the Roman Empire. The rebel victory would be short-lived, however. Over the following seven years the Romans returned in full force and methodically recaptured and subdued their runaway province, burning Jerusalem to the ground for good measure in 70AD. And who were the last holdouts? The Sicarii, who by now had retreated to their cliff-top fortress at Masada.

Between the years 72-73AD a Roman legion consisting of over 10,000 soldiers surrounded the bottom of the cliff at Masada and laid siege to the fortress when its inhabitants refused to surrender. According to historical accounts, 967 Sicarii rebels and family members were holed up inside the fortress. After several months of siege the Romans built a ramp on top of a natural spur of bedrock along the fortress' western side and were able to breach the defensive wall. Upon entering the fortress they found only six survivors; the rest of the Sicarii had committed suicide. At this point in the story, Alon had me read a passage taken from an historical account of a speech given by one of the Sicarii leaders detailing their decision to die with honor rather than be killed or subjugated by the Romans. It was pretty stirring. And this became the legend of the Siege of Masada. The Jewish rebels who refused to surrender. The fall of Masada is often regarded as the end of the First Jewish-Roman War.

When I got home from Israel and began working on the final version of this journal, I came across a lot of information online that seems to dispute some of the historical accounts of the Siege of Masada. The problem with the accuracy of the events at Masada lie in the fact that almost all of the historical details are based on the accounts of just *one* man: Flavius Josephus (born Yosef ben Mattityahu). Josephus was a Jewish military leader during the First Jewish-Roman War. He was the general of the Jewish forces in Galilee before surrendering to the Romans following the Siege of Yodfat, a terrible battle that ended with the sacking of the town and the deaths of most of its inhabitants. Josephus was spared his life when he told the Roman military general, Vespasian, that Jewish messianic prophesies made references to Vespasian becoming the next Roman emperor. Not only did Vespasian spare him his life for telling him this, but after he *became* emperor he gave Josephus his freedom. Josephus adopted the emperor's family name (Flavius) and became a full Roman citizen. He was an advisor and friend of Vespasian's son, Titus, who became emperor in 79AD. Josephus would go on to write many historical accounts of that time, including the Siege of Masada. In fact, his writings are often cited as the historical basis of events that occurred during the First Jewish-Roman War.

In regards to the Siege of Masada, though, some of Josephus' accounts are either not accurate or surrounded by inconsistencies. He presumably based his narration on the commentaries of the military commanders who had taken part in the siege. His description of the fortress wasn't completely accurate. For example, he claimed there was only one palace when in actuality there were two. He also overstated the size of the defensive walls. And even his startling assertion of the mass suicide inside the fortress is now disputed by archaeologists. Josephus claimed that 960 Sicarii had committed suicide yet only the skeletal remains of a few dozen people have been found at the site. *Hmmmmm*. But I don't think a few inconsistencies will tarnish the legend (or myth) of Masada. It *was* the scene of one of the closing battles of the First Jewish-Roman War and its message of 'no fear, no surrender' is still a powerful political mantra used in Israel today. Besides, it's an awesome archaeological site. So if you visit the Dead Sea area of Israel put this place on your must-see list.

We took the cable car back down to the entrance area and spent some time visiting the Masada Museum. The museum contains ancient artifacts found at the site during the 1960s excavations led by Professor Yigael Yadin of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I love museums and this one was pretty cool. The galleries are separated into nine scenes designed to immerse the visitor in the story of Masada. It is dimly lit and feels as if you're wandering through a cave. With the aid of earphones one walks through the various scenes learning about Herod, the Rebels, and the Roman Army. The archaeological pieces are cleverly exhibited within this dark, eerie environment, making the sculptures and other artifacts on display seem more dramatic. If you visit Masada on your own (without a tour guide) then start here first. Everything you need to know about the site is contained within this museum.

By 11:30am we were back on the bus heading north on Highway 90. Roughly forty minutes later, as we approached the northern end of the Dead Sea, we stopped for a lunch break at a restaurant located within the visitors' center of Qumran National Park administered by the Kalya Kibbutz. The kibbutz was established in 1929 but had to be evacuated and was ultimately destroyed by Jordanians in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. It was later reestablished after Israel occupied the West Bank during the Six-Day War of 1967. Adjacent to the kibbutz, on a marlstone plateau, is the ancient Qumran archaeological site, a former settlement dating back to the Hasmonean Dynasty that controlled Judea during Hellenistic times. Qumran was inhabited primarily by a mystic Jewish sect known as the Essenes. The settlement was destroyed by the Romans during the First Jewish-Roman War. Qumran's claim to fame, though, was that it was the

settlement nearest to the Qumran caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered over a period of ten years (from 1946 to 1956). The Dead Sea Scrolls are a set of ancient Jewish manuscripts from the Second Temple period. The nearly 15,000 scrolls and scroll fragments found were written between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD and include the oldest surviving manuscripts of entire books later included in the biblical cannons. They are now housed at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

I will be mentioning the Dead Sea Scrolls again on Day 10 when we visited the Shrine of the Book (a wing of the Israel Museum) where the scrolls are kept. Our purpose in stopping in Qumran was to have lunch since this was probably the only rest stop in the area. But those who wanted to skip lunch could pay the entrance fee and visit sections of the archaeological site or see the caves were the scrolls were found. Alon didn't seem too enthusiastic about the place (especially since we'd be seeing the actual Dead Sea Scrolls in Jerusalem) so I don't think anyone in the group actually went into the park. At least, not the ones who opted for lunch. The parking lot was full of tour buses and the restaurant/buffet section was packed. Tourists had to form long queues at the buffet and combined with the slow service provided by the overwhelmed staff most of our time here was spent just getting something to eat.

We were back on the bus by 2:30pm and drove north for another 15 minutes before turning east onto Highway 1 near the Beit HaArava settlement and kibbutz. Highway 1 is one of Israel's main highways, stretching all the way to Tel Aviv from the West Bank. We traversed it for about 45 minutes before reaching Jerusalem. The scenery was mostly the beige-colored sand and rock formations of the Judaean Desert. We saw caravans of camels and at least one Bedouin camp along the way. Upon entering the city we drove to the *HaMasu'ot Lookout* point situated atop Mt. Scopus (near one of the three campuses of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) to get a panoramic view of the city. During ancient times Mt. Scopus – located on the city's northeastern side – was often used as a base to attack Jerusalem. And I could clearly see why. The elevation looks down strategically onto the hilly terrain of the city. From this vantage point we could see the Dome on the Rock, the gold-topped Islamic shrine that sits atop the Temple Mount within the walled Old City, considered one of Jerusalem's most iconic images. Alon pointed out several other notable sites to us but they appeared somewhat undiscernible from this distance. At any rate, we would be seeing many of these places up close during our three-day stay in Jerusalem.

From here we headed to the nearby Temple Mount Sifting Project center to learn a little about archaeological excavations within the city and about the project itself, which has found numerous artifacts from the Second Temple Period by sifting through debris removed from beneath the Temple Mount area. A 20-year old Canadian archaeology student gave us a brief introductory lesson on how archaeologists excavate a site, touching upon the science of stratigraphy, the study of rock layers. Using an illustrated board – which she moved around like letters on the game show Wheel of Fortune – she took us through the various phases of the excavations that have gone on around the Temple Mount area, mentioning the different sites that have been unearthed over the years.

She also told us how the Temple Mount Sifting Project got started. During the late 1990s, the *Jerusalem Waqf*, a Jordanian-appointed organization responsible for managing the current Islamic structures of the Al-Aqsa mosque compound inside the Old City, received permission to renovate an underground vaulted prayer hall. This prayer hall, called the Al-Marwani Mosque, measures roughly 500 square meters (600 sq yards) and is located underneath the southeastern corner of the Al-Aqsa mosque compound. The prayer hall was empty during the time of the Crusaders and they used it as a stable for their cavalry horses, nicknaming the site Solomon's Stables. When construction began on the Al-Marwani Mosque no consideration was given to the archaeological importance of the soil. In 1999, using heavy earth moving equipment, nearly 9,000 tons of archaeologically-rich debris was removed from the site around the Temple Mount and dumped in the Kidron Valley to the northeast of the Old City. Supposedly, the Israeli Antiquities Authority sampled the soil for artifacts but no full-scale excavations ensued. In 2004, two Israeli archaeologists obtained excavation permits to check the debris, and under the auspices of the Bar-llan University the dumped soil was moved to a secure location within the Emek Tzurim National Park where it has been undergoing excavations. Although the project has had financing difficulties in the past and its center was even forced to move to a new location, the work of excavating and researching the Temple Mount debris continues.

In addition to its archaeological work of identifying the artifacts unearthed by the excavations, the Temple Mount Sifting Project is also a public learning center where visitors can actually participate in the excavation process. After our brief lecture concluded, we were invited to help sift through buckets of debris in the hopes of finding artifacts. Our group split up into teams and proceeded to separate tables containing sifting boards. In my team were Marti and Shawn. We picked up a bucket filled with Temple Mount debris sludge (which were lined up on the ground near us) and dumped it onto the sifting board before watering it down with

a hose to remove dirt and mud. Afterwards we carefully sifted through the debris trying to find artifacts. Several volunteer university students went from table to table checking on our progress and instructing us on what to look for: namely, pieces of glass, pottery, mosaic fragments, special stones or metal objects. We sifted through three buckets of sludge and found several pottery fragments. It was pretty cool. I felt like a wannabe Indiana Jones! They even gave us certificates with our names on it thanking us for helping to preserve Israel's history. When we finished our sifting, we gathered around one of the staff members who showed us some very interesting pieces of artifacts found by the project, like coins and larger pottery fragments all dating back to the Second Temple Period or the Byzantine Period.

Our visit to the Temple Mount Sifting Project concluded at 5:00pm. We left the site and drove down towards the Old City, passing a section of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives, the famous garden area where Jesus was arrested before his crucifixion. Our bus followed a path around the northern walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Along the way we saw several of the Old City's famous gates, including perhaps the nicest one, the Damascus Gate, originally built in 1537 under the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire's longest ruling sultan. Flanked by two towers, this gate provides access to the Arab bazaar inside the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. I will be providing more information about the history and divisions within the Old City on Day Nine.

We reached the Inbal Jerusalem Hotel on Jabotinsky Street by 5:30pm. The hotel was conveniently located only a few blocks from the Old City. After checking in I went up to my room and made a quick cup of instant coffee and unpacked some of the clothes I would be wearing over the coming days. I quickly hand-washed one of my used T-Shirts and hung it up to dry in the bathroom. At 6:00pm the group gathered on the bus again and drove a short distance to a popular restaurant called the Sea Dolphin on Shim'on Ben Shatakh Street for an included dinner. The restaurant was very busy and we were seated at one long, cramped table next to a small bar area. I do not recall what was served. The food was very tasty but the shared portions, placed in the middle of the table, were not very large considering the size of our group. Service was a little slow, too. I never got my espresso at the end of the meal and didn't even bother complaining about it because of the hectic pace of the servers.

We left the restaurant around 7:20pm and headed over to the Tower of David citadel inside the Old City to see the famous nightly outdoor music and light show. We drove to the entrance of the Mamilla Mall, an open pedestrian shopping mall

near the Jaffa Gate entrance of the Old City. We got off the bus and walked through the mall to the Jaffa Gate. Located just beyond the gate, the Tower of David is a medieval citadel (fortress) built by the Ottomans in the 1500s on the same site of older forts dating back more than 2,000 years. Alon secured our entrance and we followed hundreds of spectators into an outdoor seating section overlooking what appeared to be a large courtyard inside the fortress. The "Sound and Light" show is a dramatic performance conducted nightly using the ancient walls of the citadel as the screen and backdrop. The story of Jerusalem (and the State of Israel) is told using images flashed onto the walls of the fortress while accompanying symphony music rises in a crescendo-like build-up over a state-of-the-art sound system. I thought this was going to be a hokey tourism thing but it was actually quite exhilarating to experience. The performance lasted 40 minutes.

Following the show we walked outside the Jaffa Gate and boarded our bus and headed back to the hotel. In my room I wrote down the day's events in my journal notebook before brushing my teeth and going to bed. Because I had not watched the news earlier that morning I was unaware that an Israeli airstrike had taken out three leaders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in the Gaza Strip. The reason the Israeli Defense Forces targeted the Palestinian Islamic Jihad was in retaliation for a rocket attack launched by the group into southern Israel on May 2nd. For the remainder of my stay in Jerusalem hundreds of rockets from the Gaza Strip were fired into Israel.

Day Nine

I woke up at 5:00am feeling fully refreshed and ready for the day ahead. That is, until I turned on the TV and learned about the IDF's airstrike in the Gaza Strip the previous day. Already, dozens of retaliatory rockets had been fired into Israel as a result of the airstrike and the country was bracing for more. A lot more. I skipped my exercise routine and sat on the edge of my bed glued to the television screen. The events leading up to the Israeli airstrike supposedly began on May 2nd – the day before I arrived in Israel – when Khader Adnan, a former spokesman for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), died in an Israeli prison after an 87-day hunger

strike. The PIJ fired 102 rockets into southern Israel after Adnan's death was announced, injuring several Israelis in the city of Sderot. The Israeli airstrike had apparently targeted the leaders within the PIJ who orchestrated the attack. The PIJ was formed in 1981, and while they are not as large as Hamas there are considered one of the most dangerous Palestinian Islamist paramilitary organizations in the region, operating in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This violent group advocates for the total destruction of Israel and replacing it with a Palestinian State.

Over the coming days the IDF would continue to target PIJ militants in both Gaza and the West Bank; in retaliation, rockets kept being fired into the country. Understandably, our group was concerned and we brought the subject up with Alon, who was pretty calm about the situation. In fact, considering the country was under attack, you'd be hard-pressed to see it on the faces of everyday Israelis. The IDF's Iron Dome missile defense system took out almost all of the incoming rockets so very little damage was done. And believe me, these Palestinian militants tried their hardest to inflict casualties, launching over a thousand rockets during this short time period. As we toured Jerusalem I looked for signs of concern or panic in the population. But other than a little extra military presence around the Old City everything *looked* normal. At least to me, anyway. When asked if we should be worried about a potential rocket attack on Jerusalem, which was not targeted, Alon told us no. He said the PIJ would not risk angering the global Muslim population by accidentally damaging the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and its iconic Dome of the Rock (considered one of the holiest places in Islam). *Hmmmmm*. Normally, I would have dismissed such an argument as ludicrous. War, after all, is *war*. And if this ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians has taught the world anything, it's that public considerations mean nothing on either side by now. The ends justify the means and all that bullshit.

Remarkably, we carried on with the tour as if nothing was happening. Which is a little weird, actually. Other than a few cancelled or delayed flights out of Tel Aviv, life went on as usual. Since there wasn't a nearby bomb shelter, Alon instructed us to take refuge in the hotel's stairwells if we heard sirens going off. But no sirens went off. Nothing happened. At least not in Jerusalem. And it got me wondering about the kind of mindset one has to have to live in modern-day Israel. This is a very small country with a population of just under ten million, surrounded by hundreds of millions of Muslims who could easily transition into potential enemies if (or *when*) the shit were to hit the proverbial fan. The amount of world diplomacy and military preparedness that has to take place on a regular basis to ensure Israel's survival must exact some kind of psychological toll on the

population. *Or maybe not*. After traveling through the country for eight days now I was beginning to see the spirit of the ancient Sicarii rebels, who made their final stand at Masada, in everyday Israelis. And just like the Sicarii, today's Israelis have made up their minds. These folks aren't going anywhere and will defend every inch of their country to the bitter end if they have to. I believe this 'brothers-in-arms' mentality makes Israeli society stronger, bringing Israelis together in hard times despite their differences on such polarizing issues like judicial reform.

By 7:30am I went downstairs to have breakfast in the hotel restaurant. They put out a lovely breakfast buffet every morning. By 9:00am we boarded the bus for a visit to the Old City. We drove a short distance to the Dung Gate entrance of the Jewish Quarter near the Temple Mount. The current defensive walls surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem were rebuilt and fortified in the 16th century by Sulieman the Magnificent (one of the greatest sultans of the Ottoman Empire). Along different sections of the walls are eight gates, most of them either enlarged and/or renovated over the centuries to allow for more traffic. Some of these gates date back much further than the time of the Ottomans. Each entrance leads to one of the four quarters that make up the Old City: the Jewish Quarter, the Christian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter and the Armenian Quarter.

We walked through the Dung Gate and entered the Jewish Quarter. Just in front of us was the southwestern edge of the Temple Mount. The mount refers to a famous hill within the Old City that has been venerated for thousands of years by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Starting in 20 BC, King Herod built a large flat plaza on top of this hill surrounded by retaining walls (this includes the Western Wall) where the Second Temple once stood. The Second Temple was lost when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, but the plaza – an enormous platform-like structure – remains to this day. This platform (or, technically, the hill it sits on) is commonly referred to as the Temple Mount.

On top of the Temple Mount is the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the sacred shrine known as the Dome of the Rock. The Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is located on the southern end of the platform, was originally constructed in the 7th century AD but has been rebuilt and renovated over the centuries by succeeding Islamic dynasties. This is considered not only the second oldest mosque in the world but also one of the largest; its courtyard atop the Temple Mount can accommodate up to 400,000 worshippers. The entire site is revered as one of Islam's holiest places. Muslims refer to the Temple Mount as the *Haram al-Sharif* (Arabic for 'the Noble Sanctuary') or simply the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Near the center of the Temple Mount is the sacred gold-domed shrine known as the Dome of the Rock, perhaps

Jerusalem's most iconic image. Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad ascended to the Heavens in a prophetic vision from a stone preserved inside the shrine during the *Isra'* and *Mi 'raj,* a Night Journey described in the Quran when Muhammad met the other prophets of Islam and spoke to God. I would have loved to have gone up to the Temple Mount to see the mosque and shrine but unfortunately when we were there it was inaccessible to non-Muslims. I'm not certain if this was a normal policy or if this was due to heightened security as a result of the Israeli airstrikes the previous morning. In fact, on my very last day in Jerusalem I walked the ramparts of the city's defensive walls by myself and inadvertently ended up in the Muslim Quarter next to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. I was quickly turned away by stern-looking Israeli police guards who seemed surprised to see a Westerner wandering aimlessly in this part of the Old City. I was instructed to leave the area immediately for my own safety.

For Jews, the Temple Mount is considered the holiest site in Judaism. This is where the *First Temple* (built by King Solomon in 937 BC) and the *Second Temple* (built in 516 BC and later renovated by King Herod) once stood. Orthodox Jewish tradition maintains that the third and *final* temple will also be built on this site once the Messiah comes. Jews normally pray in the direction of the Temple Mount (or Jerusalem). According to the Talmud, the Foundation Stone (the stone inside the Dome of the Rock) is the very spot where the world came into *existence*. In addition, the site (referred to as *Mount Moriah* in the bible) is the location of several other important religious events including the Binding of Isaac from the Book of Genesis when God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (who was then spared by God). As for Christians, the site is important for its mention in both the Old and New Testaments, and for the role it played in the life of Jesus who visited the Second Temple several times during his ministry. It was here where an angry Jesus forced the moneylenders and merchants to scatter. And now, standing before it, despite my own personal views on religion, I must confess it was a deeply moving experience. Whether you refer to it as the Temple Mount, the Haram al-Sharif or Mount Moriah, this site is about as *holy* as you can find on earth.

We began our visit of the Jewish Quarter at the Jerusalem Archaeological Park adjacent to the Western Wall. The park is actually a large, excavated area surrounding the southwestern part of the Temple Mount. Here we saw remnants from the First and Second Temple Periods like the ancient city wall, the Second Temple's staircase, a preserved stone-covered street, ritual immersion baths and ancient stores. Within the Jewish Archaeological Park is a museum called the Davidson Center, which had just re-opened two months earlier after undergoing

three years of renovations. The Davidson Center lies at the foot of the Western Wall and displays ancient artifacts from the site presented in a technologically innovative and artistic way with interactive galleries that combine to tell the story of the Old City. Inside the Davidson Center you'll find artifacts (some dating back 2,700 years to the First Temple Period), including inscriptions bearing Jerusalem's ancient name ("*yrslm*") and a rare coin depicting the Temple Menorah minted during the Hasmonean dynasty, supposedly the oldest known such artistic representation of the menorah.

Inside the Davidson Center we watched an interesting video on the history of Jerusalem from the time of King David (circa 9th century BC) up to the present day. During the film I learned that Jerusalem is mentioned over 660 times in the bible. In my opinion, one of the underlining missions of Israeli archaeology is to remind the world just how far back Jews have lived in the Levant. To Israelis this legitimizes their claims that Israel is in fact the ancestral home of the Jewish people. And why would they have to prove something most people would probably agree with, *anyway*? I think it forms the political counter argument to the Palestinians' claim that Jews have stolen their land. Sadly, each side's viewpoint on the matter has only ushered in a never-ending vitriol of "*We were here first!"* versus "*We were here last*!" Hence the impasse to peace. But there is no denying one thing: a *long*, *long time* before Jesus or Muhammad ever walked the earth, Jews were already living in what is now the State of Israel.

After our stop at the Davidson Center, Alon took us on a short walk around the Jewish Archaeological Park on the southern end of the Temple Mount. We reached a series of steps leading up to a section of walled-off entrances known collectively today as the Huldah Gates. The original Huldah Gate was constructed during the Hasmonean period (the dynasty prior to King Herod). During Herod's expansion and renovation of the Old City he added two more gates. These were the ancient entrances that gave access to the Temple Mount esplanade via underground vaulted ramps. The gates were sealed off in the Middle Ages, but remnants still remain. I climbed to the top of the steps for a better view. Alon told us these were the same steps Jesus would have used to enter the Second Temple.

From the Jewish Archaeological Park we walked north alongside the sacred Western Wall, passing the wooden bridge connecting the Western Wall Plaza with the *Magharibah Gate* (also known as the Moors' Gate). This gate was constructed under the Ayyubids (a Muslim dynasty from the 12th and 13th century) on top of a previous Herodian-period gate and sits high on the wall, which is why a wooden ramp is needed to gain access. I later read online that this is the only entrance that

non-Muslims can use to access the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound atop the Temple Mount, although I do not believe it was open when we visited. The name of the gate, Magharibah, refers to the community of North African Muslims (the Moors) who were allowed to settle along the Western Wall section by the Ayyubids. Its interesting to note that Muslims continued to live alongside the Western Wall up until the Six-Day War of 1967 when Israel took control of the Old City from Jordan and expelled them from the area.

Our next stop was a visit to the Western Wall Tunnel located on the north side of the plaza adjacent to the traditional, open-air Jewish prayer site synonymous with the Western Wall. From this plaza the tunnel (and its excavated spaces) run parallel to the Western Wall going underneath several structures within the Muslim Quarter. It was first excavated in the mid-19th century by the British. After the Six-Day War, when the Old City came under the jurisdiction of Israel, the site was continuously excavated by the Israelis. In 1988, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation – comprised of mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews – was formed to take over the maintenance, excavation and restoration of the Western Wall, including this tunnel. For a fee, visitors can tour the tunnels with a guide. In our case, Alon was our tunnel guide.

In addition to providing underground access to the northern end of the Western Wall, the tunnel allows archaeologists to study how the Temple Mount was constructed and has even unearthed remnants of stone-paved streets from Jerusalem's Second Temple Period. Alon told us the western side of the Temple Mount is approximately 488 meters in length (1,600 ft) but that only about 60 meters (200 ft) makes up the open-air portion, the rest is mostly underground. In one gallery prior to entering the tunnel, Alon used miniature models (arranging them on a table) to show us what the Second Temple compound looked like during the time of King Herod, and while touring the tunnel we also watched a video presentation on how the Temple Mount was constructed more than 2,000 years ago. Basically, the hill (Mt Moriah from the bible) was flattened and a humongous platform was erected on top of it. The Second Temple stood in the center of this platform. Back then this amounted to an incredible engineering undertaking. Fanatics of the show *Ancient Aliens* would have a field day here. We walked the length of the tunnel to its northern end, next to us were the enormous stone blocks that make up the foundation of the Temple Mount's retaining walls. Each giant block was cut and placed with such precision it really made you wonder aloud how they could have accomplished this without more sophisticated equipment.

On our walk through the tunnel we came across a section of bedrock and the quarry used to create the stone blocks used for the walls; in another section we saw a drainage system dating back to the Hasmonean dynasty. We also stood on top of an excavated part of a Roman paved street from the 4th century that Alon said indicated the Temple Mount was still used by the Romans even after they destroyed the Second Temple in the year 70 AD. The tunnels were bathed in an eerie orange light that invoked a rather solemn atmosphere.

We emerged from the tunnel in the heart of the Muslim Quarter near a school building that marks the First and Second Stations of the Cross. This was the starting point where Jesus was forced to carry a large wooden cross through a section of the Old City to a spot just outside the city's original walls known as Golgotha (Calvary Hill) where he was crucified. The path Jesus walked is referred to as *Via Dolorosa*. The present day route of Jesus' last steps – which have been traversed by legions of Christian pilgrims since the early Middle Ages – was developed by the Franciscans during the 16th century under the permission of the Ottoman rulers who controlled Jerusalem at the time. The Franciscans reversed the previous direction of the pathway to follow the chronological order of the events leading to Jesus' crucifixion. The first two Stations of the Cross (where we emerged from the Western Wall Tunnel) begin at the location of the former house of Pontius Pilate (the governor of Judea who sentenced Jesus to death and is believed to have lived on the north side of the Temple Mount) and then follows the pathway Jesus was forced to walk with the cross as outlined in the Gospel of John, culminating in his crucifixion at Golgotha. The Franciscans were the ones to establish the Stations of the Cross seen along the route today, which runs from the Muslim Quarter to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the actual site of the crucifixion) in what is now the Christian Quarter of the Old City.

Alon led us down the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim Quarter. The narrow, stone-paved streets were lined with Muslim shops and filled with a curious mix of locals, tourists and the religiously devout. On one corner we came upon the marker designating the Third Station of the Cross, the spot where Jesus fell for the first time while carrying the cross. Nearby we passed the marker for the Fourth Station of the Cross when Jesus made eye-contact with his mother in the crowd, who was devastated by the image of seeing her son like this. Just further down the street we stopped in front of the Fifth Station of the Cross, the spot where Simon of Cyrene was ordered to help Jesus carry the cross. At this point we had to divert from the Via Dolorosa and continued along what (I believe) was El-Wad Street, following it back to the Western Wall Plaza.

Alon gave us thirty minutes to explore the plaza. A bank of white, plastic lawn chairs were situated along the front of the Western Wall (also known as the Wailing Wall) that were being used by mostly ultra-Orthodox Jews who congregate and pray here daily. I wasn't sure what the protocol was for non-Jews visiting the Wailing Wall, but I saw plenty of people (and not just Orthodox Jews) lined up in front of it so I kind of sidled my way between them and placed one hand on the wall and began praying. At one point in time men and women both prayed at the Western Wall, but after Israel gained jurisdiction of West Jerusalem as a result of the Six Day War, a segregation of the sexes has been put in place, probably due to conservative traditions within the faith, and women now have their own section of the wall to pray.

I am not a religious person, but as someone who had to overcome a strong alcohol addiction decades earlier I pray and meditate regularly to a Higher Power as part of my recovery process. I'm not certain if it was the spiritual significance of the Western Wall itself, considered the holiest site in Judaism, but I was suddenly overcome with emotions I could not conceal. Many people who visit the Western Wall will write prayers or ask for specific blessings on paper and insert them into the grooves and cracks of the wall. I read online that these written notes are cleaned out twice a year, around Passover and Rosh Hashanah, and are buried unread at the Mount of Olives. I left a note for my daughter Rachel, who passed away at the age of 26. Touching the wall I thanked God for my life, this trip and prayed for my family, and for Rachel in particular. I began to cry uncontrollably. Whether it was the presence of God or simply an emotional reaction to my surroundings, I cannot say, but it took me a good ten minutes or so before I could regain my composure and rendezvous with the rest of the group on the western side of the plaza.

When the group gathered again, Alon was wearing 'religious gear' he had obtained from someone inside the plaza. He explained to us that traditionally men wear three things during Jewish prayer. The first is a *kippah* (a head covering more commonly referred to by its Yiddish name, *yarmulke*). The purpose of the *kippah* evolved from Jewish tradition and serves as a reminder that God watches how we act from above. The second item he wore was a *tallit*, a large, rectangular prayer shawl that can be made of wool, cotton or synthetic fibers. Each of the four corners of the shawl have strings hanging down tied in a particular pattern called a *tzitzit.* Alon told us the purpose of the *tallit* is to remind Jews of God's commandments. The *tzitzit* is made up of fringes, each containing 8 threads and 5 knots, making a total of 613, which corresponds to the number of commandments found in the Torah. The third item he wore is known as a *tefillin*. This consists of two small,

black leather boxes held in place by leather straps. One is worn on the biceps with the strap wound seven times around the forearm and hand. The other box is worn on the forehead at the hairline and secured by a strap that goes around the back of the head and tied in a special knot at the base of the neck. And what is the purpose of the *tefillin*? Inside each one are handwritten parchments with texts from four Torah passages calling on Israelites to keep God's words in mind.

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Our tour of the Jewish Quarter ended at the Western Wall Plaza and we walked back to the bus and returned to the hotel by 12:30pm. The rest of the day was free for us to explore Jerusalem as we pleased. A group of us wanted to visit the Church of the Nativity (built on the site where Jesus was born) located in Bethlehem. Because this was not part of the original tour those of us who wanted to see the church had to do so on our own. I was not aware that Bethlehem is located within the Palestinian-controlled West Bank and under the administration of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). As such, Alon could not accompany us. But he did make arrangements with an Arab Christian guide in Bethlehem to show us the site. Our bus driver, Hamoodi, was nice enough to drive us across the border into Bethlehem. Those of us who went on this impromptu optional excursion had to pay around thirty dollars apiece, which included a traditional lunch at a restaurant in the eastern part of Bethlehem.

By 1:00pm the fourteen of us who decided to go on this excursion boarded our bus. From our hotel we drove south, taking Hebron Road (Route 60) out of Jerusalem. Just fifteen minutes into our journey we reached the heavily guarded border crossing at the barrier wall Israel has constructed over the past thirty years to keep West Bank Palestinians out of Israel. Known as the West Bank Wall (or the 'security fence' in Israel), it is often referred to as the *Wall of Apartheid* by Palestinians in the West Bank. This separation barrier was built by Israel following a wave of political violence and terrorists attacks during the Second Intifada (2000-2005). And while one could make an argument that this wall is nothing more than a symbol of forced segregation, no one can argue its efficacy. Terrorist incidences, especially suicide bombings coming from the West Bank, are down significantly since it was built. So the perceived 'pros and cons' of the wall are primarily shaped by which side of the border you live on.

When fully completed, this separation wall – or its multiple fence barriers in certain areas – will stretch approximately 708 kilometers (440 miles) along a route that is double the length of the original demarcation line (the Green Line) established by the 1949 Armistice Agreements signed by Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. And this seems to be the biggest criticism of its construction today among Palestinians and their supporters in the international community. They argue this expanded wall, which is roughly 85 percent within the West Bank, actually engulfs almost ten percent of the territory of the West Bank. Because of this, there are currently tens of thousands of West Bank Palestinians who are now isolated on the Israeli side of the wall. This is seen as an attempt by Israel to annex Palestinian lands under the guise of 'national security'. The UN's International Court of Justice has rendered an advisory opinion that the wall is a violation of international law (for extending beyond the agreed upon demarcation lines). But from the Israeli government's perspective, they view this barrier as a necessary obstacle for keeping their citizens safe. And to be honest, they make a compelling argument, because not only has the wall kept them safer but the constant threat from its immediate neighbors seems to almost warrant this 'circling the wagons' mentality.

As we approached the border-crossing I felt somewhat apprehensive. Hamoodi was an Israeli Arab (Palestinian) and spoke little English, and the fourteen of us on the bus had no clue what was going to happen at the border, especially with the country under attack. Alon instructed us to bring our passports just in case. When our bus was stopped, a young female Israeli soldier boarded and spoke briefly with Hamoodi before turning to us and smiling, asking us where we were from and where were we going. I could tell she already knew the answer. As we replied – *"We're Americans, on our way to see the Church of the Nativity"* – she was expertly scanning the group for signs of some kind of threat. But all she saw were a bunch of middle-aged and elderly American tourists. We looked about as threatening as a cheerleading squad. She didn't even ask to see our passports, simply bidding us a good day and waving the bus through the checkpoint. As we drove across the border I looked up at the wall. Rising thirty feet in the air and topped with barbed wire in certain areas, the Israeli side of the wall had very little markings on them. But on the Palestinian side the wall was covered with political and pro-militant graffiti. Some of it was actually amusing. Across the street from one restaurant a Palestinian artist had drawn a depiction of a hole in the wall with a view of Israel that looked so real I had to do a double-take. It would have been funnier if the circumstances weren't so sad.

Once we crossed into Bethlehem our driver stopped on a street corner to pick up our guide, Barbara, a young Arab Christian. She was very cheery and welcomed us to her city. Prior to visiting the Church of the Nativity we would be having lunch in a popular Arab Christian restaurant. The city's terrain is very hilly and as we descended into the eastern part of Bethlehem where the restaurant was located, Barbara pointed to a wide valley below known as Shepherd's Fields where, according to the bible, an angel appeared to the shepherds announcing the birth of Jesus. She also pointed out, with some disdain, a large Israeli settlement on top of a hill that she called an illegal Jewish settlement in the West Bank. As she spoke about Bethlehem she did not mince her words concerning the State of Israel. It became apparent to me that despite whatever tensions may exist between Christians and Muslims in the West Bank, they did seem to be unanimous in their dislike of Israelis, whom they blame for all their woes, be it political, social or economic.

On our way to the restaurant Barbara gave us a brief history of Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity. She said Bethlehem is recognized in the Hebrew bible as the birthplace of King David, and in the New Testament as the birthplace of Jesus. The revered Tomb of Rachel, the biblical matriarch of the ancient Israelites, is located at the northern entrance of Bethlehem. The city was destroyed by Roman Emperor Hadrian during the third and final escalation of the Jewish-Roman Wars (132-36 AD) but was later rebuilt in the fourth century under Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. It was Constantine's mother, Helena, who initiated the construction of the Church of the Nativity over the cave site where Jesus was purported to have been born. During the Samaritan Revolt of 591, Bethlehem was attacked and the original Church of the Nativity was destroyed. Both the city and the church were rebuilt by Roman Emperor Justinian.

In 637, Muslim armies captured Jerusalem and over the ensuing centuries a succession of Muslim dynasties preserved the Church of the Nativity and allowed Christians to worship there. In Islam, Jesus is considered the penultimate prophet of God who, according to the Quran, prophesied the arrival of his successor, the Prophet Muhammad. In 1099, the Crusaders captured Bethlehem and fortified the Church of the Nativity, constructing a new monastery and cloister on its north side. Prior to this time, the official Christian presence in Bethlehem was that of the Greek Orthodox Church, but due to the separation of the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches in the middle of the 11th century, the Crusaders replaced Greek Orthodox clerics with Latin (Catholic) clerics. This would create a long-standing

feud between the various churches currently overseeing the collection of Christian holy sites in the area.

After the Crusaders were expelled from the Levant, a back-and-forth struggle emerged between the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church over who would administer the Christian sites of the Holy Land. It wasn't until a series of signed international treaties (beginning in the 1800s) – which established a *Status Quo* governing the Christian holy sites of Jerusalem and Bethlehem – that this matter was resolved. And even *still* one can find videos online of Orthodox and Catholic priests engaging in verbal spats and physical altercations at the church and other sites. In regards to the Church of the Nativity, it is owned by *three* different church authorities. The Greek Orthodox Church owns the majority of the structure and its belongings, while the Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church own a lesser part of the property. Each of these church authorities jealously protects its own share of the site, which I think makes a mockery of the love and compassion that Jesus espoused in his ministry. But what the heck do I know, I'm just a retired letter carrier…

Ten minutes after entering the city we reached the restaurant in the eastern part of Bethlehem. I'm not sure, but this could have been the Christian neighborhood of the city. Barbara told us Bethlehem's population was currently 80 percent Muslim and 20 percent Christian. The majority of the Palestinian (or Arab) Christians who live in the West Bank and Gaza are Greek Orthodox, followed by Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Copts, Episcopalians and a number of smaller sects. Today, they only make up around two percent of the total population of the Palestinian territories because most have emigrated abroad where they are more readily accepted in certain countries then their Muslim counterparts. She said Bethlehem's population actually had a majority of Christians at one time but after more than four decades of stifling Israeli military rule (with all its restrictions and sanctions) life had become unbearable – and coupled with a growing Muslim population and the encroachment of hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers – most Palestinian Christians decided it was time to leave the Holy Land. When asked about the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the city, she said for the most part everyone gets along, and that she herself had many Muslim friends, but there were definitely limitations. For example, interfaith marriages were looked down upon and often led to social isolation from both sides. *Hardly a ringing endorsement*.

I forgot to jot down the name of the restaurant where we had lunch, but it was a large local eatery that seemed quite popular judging by the number of noontime patrons. We sat together at a long table where an assortment of traditional dishes

were placed in front of us. For starters we had several varieties of salads, pita bread and hummus and this was followed by the main course: a chicken and rice Palestinian dish called *maqluba*, which means 'upside down' in Arabic. It is a tasty combination of stewed chicken, rice and veggies cooked in a single large pot and then flipped over onto a serving dish, retaining a round molded shape. The owner of the establishment, who welcomed us when we first arrived, did the ceremonial flipping of the pot at the table, and then we all dug in. Following lunch we drove to a mini-shopping mall parking garage located along Ma'laf Street about a quarter of a mile from the Church of the Nativity. From there we walked to the site.

We headed south along Ma'laf Street (which turned into Manger Street the closer we got to the Church of the Nativity) passing many souvenir shops catering to Christian pilgrims. According to Barbara, the main economy of Bethlehem is centered around the tourism connected to the Church of the Nativity. Because Bethlehem is in the Palestinian-controlled West Bank, most tourists to the city are usually day-trippers like us who come in from Jerusalem primarily to see the site where Jesus was born and then leave immediately afterwards. And, like us, the majority of these tourists usually end up buying religious mementos like icons, crosses or other souvenirs, which she said are all made within the city. But a key problem for Bethlehem's economy has been the strict regulations and sanctions imposed on them by Israel whenever violence breaks out between Palestinians and Israelis. Because the Israeli military can shut down the border crossing whenever it wants – and can regulate who or what can get through from their side – the city suffers economically each time they do so. This is one of the reasons, she said, why so many Arab Christians have left the West Bank. It has become increasingly more difficult to make a living under Israel's military occupation.

A few blocks before reaching the Church of the Nativity, Barbara led us through a narrow, alley-like passageway called Star Street so we could see what a typical Bethlehem residential neighborhood was like. On each side of this winding, stone-paved hilly street were two-and-three story apartment buildings connected by iron railings and stairways, each entrance protected by large, green-painted metal doors. According to Barbara, large, extended families live in these buildings, creating the backbone of the close-knit neighborhoods seen throughout the city. We reached Maggid Mezritch Street at the top of the hill and headed east for several blocks towards the Church of the Nativity, walking through a busy market district. On the west side corner of Manger Square, directly in front of the Church of the Nativity, we passed the Mosque of Omar (*Masjid Umar*). Surprisingly, it is the only mosque in the Old City of Bethlehem. It is named after Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second Rashidun Caliph whose forces conquered Jerusalem in 638.

He traveled to Bethlehem and supposedly prayed at this site. While in Bethlehem, Omar issued a decree guaranteeing respect for the nativity shrine and the safety of Christians and their clergy.

We stopped in Manger Square, right in front of the Church of the Nativity, and took it all in. What was once a single church marking the site where Jesus was born has morphed into a complex encompassing approximately 12,000 sq meters (or roughly 130,000 sq feet). In 2012, this complex became the first Palestinian site to be designated an official UNESCO World Heritage Site. The church itself seems almost obscured by its surrounding structures and is not clearly defined when viewed from the square. In fact, Barbara had to point it out to us. She told us that after the original Church of the Nativity was destroyed during the Samaritan revolts of the 6th century, it was rebuilt by Byzantine Emperor Justinian who preserved the original character of the building, namely the atrium and basilica, which consisted of a nave with four side aisles. Justinian added a narthex and replaced the octagonal sanctuary with a cruciform transept complete with three apses. And while the Church of the Nativity is basically unchanged since the time of Justinian's reconstruction, there have been *numerous* repairs and additions added over the centuries. Three monasteries – a Greek Orthodox one, a Roman Catholic one and an Armenian Apostolic one – have been constructed *adjacent* to the church on its north and south sides, creating the compilation of buildings we see today.

From the square, straight ahead of us, was the façade of the Church of the Nativity and to the right, on the church's southern side, were the walls of the Armenian Monastery (with its modern bell tower) that I originally mistook to be part of the church. The Greek Orthodox Monastery was situated along the southern side of the church, as well, next to the Armenian Monastery. To the left of the church entrance on its north side was the adjacent Catholic (Franciscan) Monastery. With so many surrounding structures, we needed Barbara to sort it all out for us. For me, another confusing aspect of the church was the entrance. Having never seen photos of the Church of the Nativity prior to this trip I just assumed the entranceway would be another grand, intricately detailed affair like the ones you see at all the famous basilicas around the world. After all, this was the place where the Lord Savior was born, right? But I was wrong. Known as the Door of Humility, the entrance into the church is a plain, non-descript opening measuring only *four feet high* and not particularly wide. It was designed this way so visitors would have to bow down (in a sign of humility) upon entering the presence of God. I later read online that the original doorway was a little higher but

was shortened to its current size to prevent marauders from entering the basilica on horseback.

Barbara led us on a tour of the site. We entered the church single-file, crouching low at the entrance and found ourselves in the nave. Over the past decade restoration work has been done on the church after it was placed on the endangered list by the World Monuments Fund back in 2008, which criticized the inability of the church's three custodians – the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and the Catholic Church – to work together. It then fell on the Palestinian Authority to initiate the restoration work. The Church of the Nativity is considered a national treasure by Palestinians. Not only is it a venerated religious site, but its tourism appeal serves as an important economic lifeline for Bethlehem. Barbara said more restorative work is being planned.

The church was designed like a typical Roman basilica of its day, with a wide main aisles in the middle and four side aisles formed with Corinthian columns. On the eastern end of the church is an apse containing the sanctuary. Underneath the chancel is the grotto where Jesus is believed to have been born. Basically, the church was built over a series of cave dwellings where Mary was living at the time she gave birth to Jesus. The spot that has been designated as the *actual* place of the birth (the underground grotto) is marked with a silver star and can be accessed by stairways that are located on each side of the chancel. This raised chancel is closed by an apse containing the main altar that is separated from the chancel by a large iconostasis (a wall of religious icons and paintings used in Eastern Christian churches to separate the nave from the sanctuary). Underneath the nave we were able to see a section of the mosaic pavement from the original Church of the Nativity built in 339. There are 44 columns separating the aisles and some of them have paintings of saints that have been added over the centuries. The interior walls of the church were once covered in gilded medieval mosaics, but much of that has been lost to time and only certain restored sections still exist. The open ceiling reveals the wooden rafters of the roof, which have been recently renovated after years of neglect and water damage. Hanging down from the ceiling and displayed throughout the church are colorful Greek Orthodox sanctuary lamps. To the north side of the sanctuary was a section of the church administered by the Armenian Apostolic monastery. When we visited, this section was closed off and a Mass was in service. I couldn't tell if that section was also a part of the original church or an added extension. The priest was saying Mass to a group of parishioners who were mostly out of view from where I was standing.

When we entered the church Barbara checked the queue for the underground grotto marking the spot where Jesus was born. Unfortunately for us we had arrived in the afternoon. The growing crowds meant it would have taken most of our remaining time at the site if we elected to see the grotto because we needed to return to Jerusalem at a certain hour. So she offered us something better. She told us the grotto is more *symbolic* than accurate. Nobody, including the three Christian churches that administer the site, can say with any degree of accuracy that this was the very spot where Jesus was born. In this area of ancient Judea, people lived in cave dwellings. It is *strongly* believed through documented historical research and analysis that Mary lived and gave birth to Jesus in one of the cave dwellings beneath the land where the Church of the Nativity now stands. But no one can pinpoint the exact spot due to the fact there were multiple dwellings beneath the church. So Barbara led us to the adjoining Church of St. Catherine, on the Catholic (Franciscan) monastery side of the complex, where one can access some of these cave dwellings running underneath the Church of the Nativity. It was more likely in this area, she said, where Mary lived and gave birth. And the best part? Very few tourists were in this section when we arrived.

The Church of St. Catherine serves as a parish church of the Franciscan monastery. In 1347, a small chapel on this site was dedicated to Catherine of Alexandria, a princess from the early 4th century who converted to Christianity at the age of 14 and went on to convert hundreds more. She was imprisoned, tortured and eventually martyred at the age of 18 because of her beliefs. The church that exists today in her name was constructed in a Neo-Gothic style during Ottoman rule in the 19th century with some later additions made in 1881 funded by the Austria-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph I. This is the church used every year by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem to conduct the internationally televised Midnight Mass from Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. Not too long ago, Pope Francis sent a fragment piece of the wooden manger Jesus is believed to have been born in, and this venerated relic is now kept at a side altar along the southern nave of the church. We also saw a bas relief sculpture of the *Tree of Jesse* by Polish artist Czeslaw Dzwigaj depicting an olive tree displaying the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham through Joseph and incorporating symbols from the Old Testament. This sculpture was a gift to the church by Pope Benedict XVI on his trip to the Holy Land in 2009.

We walked through the restored medieval cloister of the Franciscan Monastery and entered the church. Underneath the Church of St Catherine are a series of caves and chapels that extend below the Church of the Nativity. We descended the staircase located inside the church and into the two-room cave and chapel of Saint

Jerome, a Christian priest, translator and historian who is most famous for translating the Holy Bible into Latin. For over thirty years (383 – 404 AD) Saint Jerome lived in this cave dwelling while translating the bible from the older Greek translation into Latin. He used the original Hebrew bible for his translations rather than the Septuagint (the established Greek translation of the Hebrew bible) which was criticized by Rabbinical Judaism for its mistranslations. Barbara told us that on the other side of the cave wall from the Chapel of Saint Jerome was the grotto marking the birth of Jesus. There were other cave passages here but they were closed off by metal gates. After our visit to the cave dwelling we exited the church. As we were leaving we stopped to listen to a practicing choir offering up a beautiful rendition of 'Gloria'.

From here we made our way back to the parking garage on Ma'laf Street and drove a short distance to a large shop named Tabash Souvenirs located not far from the border wall. We were given thirty minutes or so to shop. All of the items sold at the store were made in Bethlehem or other parts of the West Bank, according to the owners, who said our purchases would be helping the local economy. Talk about guilt-inducing sales pitches! But I must confess, the items, almost all of it religious in nature, was very nice. Back home, one wall of my enclosed balcony/patio area is covered in artwork from my trips abroad that are representative of the world's major religions. To date, I have acquired pieces that represent Judaism, Islam, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and American indigenous tribal religions. I purchased a Jerusalem Cross to add to my collection. The salesperson told me the Jerusalem Cross is exclusive to this area of the Holy Land. It is a heraldic cross consisting of a large cross potent surrounded by four smaller Greek crosses, one in each quadrant. This cross became an emblem and part of the coat of arms of the Crusader's Kingdom of Jerusalem during the 13th century.

After shopping we said our goodbyes to Barbara and headed back to our hotel in Jerusalem, arriving by 5:00pm. I made a cup of coffee in my room and wrote the day's details into my journal notebook while intermittingly watching the latest news updates on the rocket attacks. So far, casualties and property damages were at a minimum as Israel's Iron Dome defense system effectively shot down almost all of the rockets launched into the country. At 6:15pm we gathered in the hotel lobby for an included dinner. Alon led us on a 15-minute walk to a restaurant located within the First Train Center, an outdoor mall and cultural center situated at the end of Emek Rafaim Street in the German Colony neighborhood of Jerusalem. On our way to the restaurant we walked through Liberty Bell Park. This large, family-friendly garden park was established in 1776 in honor of the 200th anniversary of

America's independence. We stopped briefly to see the park's namesake monument: a replica of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. From here it took us only a few more minutes before we reached the First Train Center.

Since it first opened as an outdoor mall in 2013, the First Train Center has quickly become a modern cultural center, featuring not only retail shops but also a nice selection of restaurants, a theatrical venue for shows and concerts and a place to host local fairs. Known in Hebrew as *Tachana Rishona,* the center was built on the site of Jerusalem's first train station from the late 1800s. The original train station, which is now part of the center, was one of the few public buildings constructed in Jerusalem during the Ottoman period. It opened in the late 19th century to provide service from Jaffa to Jerusalem. When the train station closed in 1998 it fell into neglect and disarray. Plans were later drawn to restore and revitalize this historic site. The station's façade and structure have been restored and the area around it renovated. Today it is considered a trendy spot in the affluent German Colony neighborhood of Jerusalem. We ate in a very popular restaurant inside this center. Again, I failed to write down the name of the establishment. Sorry, but I'm not a 'foodie' so you won't find a lot of information on the places I've eaten in my journals. Having said that, the meal was outstanding, the best we had while in the country. And for the record, I was not bowled over by Jewish cuisine on this trip. In fact, growing up, I never once heard anyone ask, *"Hey, do you know of any good Jewish restaurants in the area?"* But this place put out quite a spread for us; the usual salads, pita and hummus, with accompanying soup and then sliced beef, chicken and fish dishes, and *two* types of cheesecake with ice cream for dessert. Holy gut buster!

We got back to the hotel by 8:30pm. After brushing my teeth I sat down and spent an hour sending photos and text messages to family and friends back home who were worried about the ongoing rocket attacks that were now being reported Stateside. I assured them everything was fine... (um, *hopefully*). I went to bed shortly thereafter, thoroughly exhausted after another awesome day of sightseeing.

Day Ten

I was awake by 5:00am. Despite a solid seven and a half hours of sleep I was dragging my ass that morning. I decided to skip my exercise routine. While having my coffee I edited the photos on my camera and cellphone and jotted down a few more notes in my journal. The local television news broadcast kept running a highlight reel of Palestinian rockets being shot out of the sky; a few had managed to slip through Israel's defenses but had caused minor damages. *Another day in the Holy Land*, *folks.* After shaving, showering and dressing I headed downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, sitting with Laura and Mary Beth. By 8:30am we were on the bus ready to begin the day's sightseeing activities.

We had three scheduled stops on our itinerary for this day. The first was a visit to the Israel Museum, situated on a hill in the central Jerusalem neighborhood of Givat Ram. The museum is part of a special government district within Givat Ram called *Kiryat HaMemshala* where many of Israel's most important national institutions are located, including the Knesset, the Supreme Court, the National Library, the Bank of Israel, and several museums and prestigious learning institutions. We left our hotel and drove north to Ramban Street and took that heading west through Rehavia, a leafy upscale neighborhood. After crossing a busy boulevard called Sderot Ben Tsvi we traveled through a section of Rehavia Park just to the south of the Knesset building. Within this park (also referred to as the Valley of the Cross Park) is the Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Cross, an 11th century building erected over the site where – according to Christian tradition – the tree used to make Jesus' crucifixion cross once stood. A short distance later we arrived at the Israel Museum's parking lot, across from the Bible Lands Museum of Jerusalem, an archaeological museum that explores the history and culture of the peoples mentioned in the Bible.

Our purpose in coming to the Israel Museum was to visit the Shrine of the Book, the building housing the Dead Sea Scrolls, to learn more about the importance of these ancient Jewish manuscripts. Before we entered the Book of the Shrine, Alon walked us around an enormous and fascinating open-air scale model replica of what Jerusalem looked during the Second Temple period. This miniature reconstruction, which is adjacent to the Shrine of the Book, is *incredibly* detailed, outlining the city's size and streets with scale models of the Second Temple atop the Temple Mount, Herod's fortified palace, the original walls of Ancient Jerusalem and so forth. It visually displayed the architectural character of ancient

Jerusalem. As we walked around this impressive scale model, Alon would stop to point out specific areas of interests. For example, he pointed to the sections around the Temple Mount we had visited the previous day and showed us the small hill just outside the ancient city walls were Jesus was crucified (which is today the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher).

Before we entered the Shrine of the Book, Alon had us sit in a spectator area in front of the scale model of ancient Jerusalem to tell us about the religious divisions affecting the Jewish population during the Second Temple period. He told us there existed several Jewish sects in the Levant competing with one another, these were primarily the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes. The Pharisees, a group that rose to several thousand members, would eventually have great sway over Jewish religious thought in the Levant. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70AD, all three sects would eventually disappear, but it was Pharisaic beliefs that lived on to become the foundational, ritualistic and liturgical basis of Rabbinic Judaism. Today, Pharisaic traditions are an important part of all Jewish religious movements. Their vision of Jewish law as a means by which all Jews could engage with the sacred in their daily lives became very appealing, especially after the destruction of the Second Temple and the forced exile of Jewish people from the Levant.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, Alon continued, are believed to have been written by the Essenes, a Jewish sect who lived near the Qumran caves where the original group of scrolls were found. But, like everything else concerning religion, there are many viewpoints and controversies. Some scholars contend the scrolls may have been written in Jerusalem and then transferred to the caves before the outbreak of the First Jewish-Roman War. Some scholars argue that the scrolls were the work of several different Jewish sects. So there are still many unanswered questions concerning the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The most prevailing argument is that members of the Essene sect may have been driven out of Jerusalem due to disputes with the religious leaders of the temple over issues like Torah interpretations and conflicts with the sacred Jewish calendar. The Roman calendar, for example, was in use during this time and did not coincide with the Jewish calendar, so sacred Jewish events (like Yom Kippur) were not held on the days they were supposed to be. The Essenes viewed all of this as a portent for the approaching ‘end of days’ and espoused a highly dualistic view of the world where people were categorized as either followers of the Light or followers of the Darkness. And like any doomsday cult, they looked for imminent Divine judgement of the wicked. So the theory goes these piously religious Jews settled in

the Dead Sea area where they stored the scrolls in the caves near Qumran for posterity's sake.

We spent over an hour inside the Shrine of the Book where the Dead Sea Scrolls are kept. The shrine is a separate building of the Israel Museum. It was constructed during the 1960s and has a white domed shape that resembles a flattened Buddhist stupa. The structure is surrounded by a reflecting pool. Across from the shrine is a black basalt wall. The imagery of the white building against the black wall is based on the Dead Sea scroll outlining the Essene's War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness. The shrine also contains the *Aleppo Codex*, a medieval bound manuscript written in the city of Tiberias during the 10th century, which is considered the oldest existing Hebrew Bible. The first group of scrolls were discovered in 1947 by a shepherd boy in a cave at Qumran near the Dead Sea (within what is now Qumran National Park where we stopped on Day 8). Subsequently, additional scrolls were discovered in various caves in the area. The scrolls consists of over 15,000 mostly small fragments representing 800 to 900 original manuscripts. The pieces are labeled by manuscript and also by the cave where they were found. Only a small portion of the scrolls are on display at any given time. This is due to their frailty. The ones on display have to be rotated every 3-6 months to preserve them from the elements. They are stored in a special warehouse for this purpose.

The main gallery is a large round room, dimly lit, with what looked like hermetically sealed display cases containing sections of scrolls. Information boards provide specific details on the particular scrolls on display. You can also learn about how the scrolls were discovered and their significance from an archaeological point of view. The Dead Sea Scrolls are considered one of the biggest archaeological discoveries made within the last eighty years. These scrolls are important for a number of reasons. First, they provide an insight into the community (or sect) that lived in Qumran during this period. And from the scrolls it becomes evident these were not cheery people, living an isolated cultist existence who espoused a dark view of the world (which they believed was about to be punished by God) and even rejected other Jews and their practices (especially those associated with the Second Temple). Many of the scrolls are concentrated on the particular group that lived in the Qumran area, providing a window into the development of Jewish Messianic movements, which in itself offers a sociological parallel to early Christianity.

Another important aspect of the Dead Sea Scrolls is that approximately a fourth of the scrolls are authentic biblical manuscripts. In addition, there are scrolls that

include pseudepigraphal works like the First Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees that, while not part of canon or scripture, shed new light on some of the common practices and beliefs of ancient Jews in the Levant. Because many of the scrolls originate from outside the sect who hid them, some scholars believe they may have been part of libraries that were emptied out prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and taken to Qumran for safekeeping. The scrolls have been dated to a period that stretches from 300 BC to the 2nd century AD, covering a significant portion of ancient Jewish history.

Taking pictures was not permitted inside the Shrine of the Book, so I've included a few stock photographs from the Internet in my photo section for those of you who want to know what the scrolls looked like. This was a fascinating stop. I would have loved to have toured the Israel Museum, as well, but we still had two more stops that day. Alon suggested we could return to the museum later during our free time in Jerusalem.

From here we drove to the *Yad Vashem* ('a memorial and a name'), Israel's official memorial museum dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. Having been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, I assumed this was going to be another heart-wrenching visit. I was not wrong. On our way to the memorial we drove through the *Kiryat HaMemshala* area, the official government precinct of the State of Israel, passing the Knesset, the National Library and the Supreme Court buildings on our righthand side along a wide avenue called Derech Ruppin. Beyond these buildings were several government ministries and the office of the prime minister. To our left was the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University. We crossed the overpass above Begin Boulevard (Highway 50) and made a left onto Shderot Herzl, another fairly large multi-lane street that runs along the southern rim of Mount Herlz.

Mount Herzl is a hilly green area next to the Jerusalem Forest on the western side of the city and is home to several memorial institutions, including Israel's national cemetery. It is named after Theodor Herzl, the Austro-Hungarian Jewish lawyer, writer and political activist who formed the Zionist Organization in the late 1800s and is officially recognized as the Father of Zionism in Israel. His tomb lies at the top of Mount Herzl. Since 1952, the southern slope of Mount Herzl has become the official burial site of Israel's leaders. The hill also contains the military cemetery for those who've sacrificed their lives in defense of the country and another section for those killed in terrorist acts. Alon told us Mount Herzl is often used as a venue for commemorative events and national celebrations. The Yad Vashem memorial is located a short distance from the main entrance plaza of the

Herzl Museum. We pulled into the memorial's parking lot around 10:30am and spent the next two hours learning about the Holocaust. And while this was a very sad visit it was also a necessary one. Nothing propelled the desire for a Jewish state more than the horrible events of the Holocaust, which claimed the lives of over six million innocent Jews. I had to brace myself emotionally for what I was about to see. And I still cried at the end of it.

Established in 1953, the purpose of the Yad Vashem is not only to research, document and teach about the Holocaust – and to expand on the topic of genocide, in general – but it also serves as a memorial that gives a voice to its victims, listing their names and echoing their stories, so that their memories will never be forgotten. It is the second most visited site in Israel after the Western Wall. The entire complex (nearly 45 acres) sits atop a hilly area called the Mount of Remembrance on the western slope of Mount Herzl. It is divided into two types of facilities: one side is dedicated to research and the scientific study of the Holocaust, while the other side is comprised of the museum and memorials for the larger public. We visited the Holocaust History Museum. It was designed in the shape of a triangular concrete prism that dissects the complex. Seen from above it resembles a gigantic spike wedged into the hillside. Visitors walk a route that takes them through a series of underground galleries that branch off from the main hall.

After entering the complex (admission is free), Alon led us first to the *Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations*, a small park commemorating the non-Jews who risked their own lives to save Jews from the Nazis. Between the landscaped pathway are sections of walls engraved with the names of those individuals. Each year more names are added to the list. Alon wanted us to know – before we entered the museum – that there *were* people in Nazi-controlled areas that helped Jews escape or provided some kind of assistance to them. Those who were known had trees planted in their honor or had their names engraved in this park. A monumental sculpture also honors the nameless individuals who tried to help but whose identities remained a mystery after the war (like those who may have provided temporary shelter or smuggled food to Jews during this time). It's important to know this because once inside the museum the origins of anti-Semitism are laid bare to show how certain countries, especially in Europe, could have allowed such an event to occur in the first place. And the Holocaust didn't just affect Jews; millions of other Nazi 'undesirables' – Slavs, gypsies, homosexuals, the infirmed and disabled – were victims, as well. The process by which genocide unfolds – through hateful racial or ethnic stereotyping combined with angry or inciteful political rhetoric – is thoroughly examined inside the museum. One of the goals of Yad Yashem is to show that people can still rise

above the hatred, like those honored in the garden who mustered the courage to do the *righteous* thing even if all around them society's morals were collapsing. This may be the most important lesson the museum teaches.

We had over an hour and a half to explore the museum on our own. After establishing a rendezvous point the group split up. This is a place one needs to experience individually. As you proceed through the galleries, the photographs and displays and information boards will render you speechless and tie your emotions up in a very unpleasant knot. I was able to walk through all of the galleries during our visit, but towards the end I was hurrying to finish within our allotted time. The first galleries explain the rise of Nazism and the growth and spread of anti-Jewish ideas and policies. There was a quote on one display by the Jewish-German journalist, writer and satirist Kurt Tucholsky, who opposed Nazism during its rise in the 1920s and 30s, publishing his works under several pseudonyms. His famous quote: *"A country is not just what it does, it is also what it tolerates"*. The galleries explain Germany's aggression prior to the outbreak of the war and then the invasions of Poland (with its terrible aftermath) and the subsequent invasions of France through Belgium and the Netherlands. The collaboration of the French Vichy regime with the Germans allowed for the extension of anti-Semitism policies into France's colonies in North Africa. There were galleries depicting the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the invasion of the Soviet Union, the rising resistance against the Germans and the implementation of the Final Solution. The last exhibit was particularly hard to watch: the mass executions and the discovery of the dead bodies by Allied Forces. I was so overcome with emotions I needed to duck into a bathroom stall at the end of the museum to shed a few tears and regain my composure before rendezvousing with the group.

We left the museum by 12:15pm and drove to our final stop of the day, the Mahane Yehuda Market located within one of Jerusalem's historic districts. We drove just to the east of the Givat Ram government center and spent the next several hours exploring the market area and several of the adjacent narrow, winding streets and courtyards that make up the Nachlaot district. The neighborhoods here were established outside the walls of Old Jerusalem starting in the late 1800s to alleviate overcrowding within the Old City. Today, 32 courtyard neighborhoods lie within the Nachlaot district surrounding the Mahane Yehuda Market. Due to ongoing gentrification in recent years the housing prices here have risen dramatically. But the neighborhoods still retain their historic character and are now a part of the city's tourism draw.

We began our visit at the Mahane Yehuda Market. It was lunch time on a Friday and the marketplace was filled with locals stocking up for the Shabbat. The market is several blocks long, bordering Jaffa Street in the north and Agripas Street in the south with multiple side streets and narrow alleyways in between. We walked along the two main streets of the marketplace: Eitz Chaim Street (which is a covered market area) and Mahane Yehuda Street, which serves as a large open-air market. Often referred to as the '*Shuk*', the area has over 250 vendors selling everything from fresh fruits and vegetables to meat and fish, grains, seeds, nuts, spices, baked goods, wines and liquors. One can also shop for clothing, shoes, textiles, housewares and Judaica (Jewish ceremonial art or objects used for ritual purposes). Over the years the marketplace has become another of Jerusalem's popular nightlife centers due its many bars, restaurants and live music venues. After leading us through an orientation walk around the main market area, Alon gave us almost an hour and a half to have lunch and to explore the marketplace on our own. The selections for lunch were awesome. In addition to the juice bars, cafes and restaurants, there are numerous food stand vendors offering falafel, kebobs, shawarma, kibbeh, and shashlik. And don't get me started on the desserts. Rows of fresh baklava, halva, zalabiya and knafeh! I joined Laura and Shaune who talked me into a tasty fish and chips lunch inside one of the covered food court areas. Afterwards I purchased two pieces of baklava for dessert and spent the rest of the time walking through the marketplace snapping photos. It was a bustling, colorful place – with vendors shouting out their best prices to the passing public – and I'm glad I had the opportunity to experience it.

At 2:00pm we rendezvoused on the corner of Jaffa and Mahane Yehuda Streets. Alon then led us on a walking tour of several of the neighborhoods just to the south of the marketplace, beyond Agripas Street, which are part of the historic Nachlaot district of central Jerusalem. The first neighborhood that was created in this district was *Even Yisrael* back in 1875. It became the sixth Jewish neighborhood built outside the Old City walls. At the time, the Old City had become over-crowded and unsanitary, forcing middle-class Jews to spread out to other areas of the city. To the west of Even Yisrael another neighborhood called *Mishkenot Yisrael* was established that same year, followed by more and more neighborhoods that slowly grew to 32 in number over the coming decades (and into the early 20th century), all situated around the Mahane Yehuda Market. Eventually, working-class Jews joined the middle-class families already living there and various different Jewish ethnic communities emerged within the district spurred on by more arrivals from Europe and elsewhere. At one point, the Nachlaot district boasted the largest concentration of synagogues in the world, with roughly 300 of them located within

this short radius of low-rise courtyard neighborhoods, many of these synagogues no bigger than a small room capable of accommodating a dozen or so worshippers.

We walked through the narrow, stone paved, alley-like streets of the *Ohel Moshe* neighborhood to a quaint courtyard called the Habustan Hasefaradi ('Spanish Garden'), a nod to the Sephardi Jews who originally settled the area. While standing inside the courtyard, Alon offered us some locally made fruit juices (each bottle claiming to cure everything from diabetes to limp dick syndrome) and passed around a package of chocolate rugelach – a traditional Jewish pastry – that he had purchased in the marketplace. He spoke about the history of the Nachlaot district before leading us east along Hakarmel Street into the *Mazkeret Moshe* neighborhood. This neighborhood was established in 1882 with the support of Moses Montefiore, a very prominent British Jewish banker and financier. It was originally intended for Ashkenazi Jews from northern and eastern Europe. Montefiore sponsored several of these early Jewish neighborhoods and four of them are named after him. We stopped to see the ornate façade of the Hessed Verahamim synagogue, a small Sephardi synagogue from the 1920s located within this Ashkenazi neighborhood across from the Weiner Heritage Center (an archive of historic photographs). The synagogue was originally a pub until a Sephardi butcher – upset over the presence of a bar in a religious neighborhood – bought the place and converted into a synagogue. It is fairly representative of the tiny temples one finds all over the Nachlaot district.

From here we made our way south along the labyrinth of alleys, side streets and hidden courtyards and stopped to see the home of a very popular Orthodox rabbi named Aryeh Levin who passed away in 1969. His home is situated on the edge of *Sukkat Shalom*, the Yemenite neighborhood of Nachlaot. Rabbi Levin was known as the "Rabbi of the Prisoners" for his visits with Jewish prisoners held in the Central Prison of Jerusalem during the British Mandate period. He advocated for them and helped many of them get through their ordeal. The side of his former home has a colorful graffiti mural dedicated to him. This particular area had quite a bit of impressive graffiti art. In fact, there are walking tours available that visit the numerous street art within the neighborhoods. We continued walking until we reached Mesilat Yesharim Street near the eastern boundary of the Nachlaot district. Our bus picked us up here and drove us back to the hotel.

We arrived around 3:40pm. The rest of the day was free for us to explore Jerusalem on our own. I was very tired from all the walking and decided to take a short nap, failing to set my cellphone alarm beforehand. I didn't wake until 7:30pm. It was already dark outside and I opted to stay in. I was not very hungry

after a heavy breakfast and lunch and decided to nosh on some snacks and write in my journal and edit photos. I sent some pictures to friends and family back home and then watched the international news broadcasts on TV to see what was happening with the rocket attacks. *Yep, still incoming*. I went to bed by 10:00pm. Tomorrow was a big day for us, we would be visiting the Christian and Armenian Quarters of the Old City.

Day Eleven

I was wide awake by 4:30am. It was Friday, the last official day of the tour and we were going to be spending it visiting some of the most venerated Christian sites around the Old City of Jerusalem. Later that evening we would be having Shabbat dinner with a local family, a first time experience for me. This would be our farewell dinner as almost everyone was leaving the following morning. I performed my travel exercise routine before jumping into the shower. Over two cups of instant coffee I jotted down notes in my journal and set aside the last of my remaining clean clothes for the next two days. I received a troubling text message from my brother Joe and his wife Teri after they saw images of the missile attacks coming from Gaza on the news. I had to reassure them it looked worse than it was and that we were actually okay. Although, I'm not sure if they were convinced. Such are the perceptions of Americans concerning the Middle East. It always seems dangerous and unstable to us. I headed downstairs for breakfast at 7:30am.

By 8:30am we drove to Mount Zion, a hill located just outside the Old City's Zion Gate entrance. Alon led us on foot to a two-story structure known as the *Cenacle* (or the Upper Room), which is traditionally believed to be the site of the Last Supper where – according to the Gospel – Jesus had his last meal with the apostles before his crucifixion. In the Christian bible the Cenacle was also the place where the apostles continued to gather after Jesus' death and also where the Holy Spirit alighted upon them on Pentecost. Obviously, this is not the original structure where the Last Supper occurred. Different buildings have stood here going back to the time of Jesus, and no one can say for certain if this was the exact spot of the Last Supper, but it's within the tight proximity of where biblical scholars believe the event happened. As for the current building, there seems to be

a dispute among scholars as to when it was constructed. Early records by pilgrims to Jerusalem in the 4th century reported visiting a structure (most likely a synagogue) on Mount Zion commemorating the Last Supper. Later, a basilica was built here but later destroyed. A section of one wall of the current building dates back to the Byzantine Period when the site became a church.

Next to the Cenacle is the Abbey of the Dormition, a Catholic abbey built in the early 1900s over the site where tradition states that the Blessed Virgin Mary died. The abbey has a circular design with four towers. At the time, we could not visit this church (I don't remember why now) but inside are two spiral staircases that lead to the crypt designating the spot where Mary died. Her tomb is located at the foot of Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem and marked by the Church of the Assumption, which was built around an ancient Judean rock-cut tomb that Eastern Christians believe is where Mary was laid to rest. But there are some contentions to this idea. While touring Turkey years earlier, I visited the House of the Virgin Mary near the ancient ruins of Ephesus. Some scholars believe this may be the final resting place of Jesus' mother. The New Testament isn't really clear on what happened to Mary in the years following the death of Jesus. According to the New Testament, while Jesus was on the cross he instructed the Apostle John to look after his mother. John, to avoid the prosecution of Christians following Jesus' death, left the area and settled in or near Ephesus in what is today the country of Turkey. If the Virgin Mary was indeed under his care, he surely would have taken her with him to Ephesus. Or, at least, that is the argument of those who believe this alternative theory on where Mary died.

The two-story stone building traditionally referred to as the Cenacle (which is Latin for 'dining room') is quite an intriguing puzzle in itself. The spot where the Cenacle stands has functioned as a synagogue, church and mosque throughout its history, having been successively held by the three major faiths of the region at one time or another. A testament to the sacrality of Jerusalem. Due to severe restrictions on excavating the religious grounds of the Old City, archaeologists cannot properly assess the development, relationship or even the exact age of the structures associated with the Cenacle. And to muddy the waters even further, since the Middle Ages the building's lower story has been associated with the Tomb of King David, although most biblical scholars agree that the *real* tomb of King David is probably located in the area of the former Jebusite City of David, an ancient settlement that overlooked the Kidron Valley just to the east. In fact, modern scholars think Mount Zion is actually the hill east of the current site. So, *who knows*? Based on my visits to numerous sacred sites worldwide – be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu – I have come to the conclusion that

it isn't necessary for these locations to be the *exact* spot where something sacred occurred. They just have to be in the general area. After all, what makes a place symbolically 'holy' is not based on any scientific proof that something miraculous happened; rather, it only requires the faithful to *believe* that it did.

We ascended the stairway inside the Cenacle to the second floor. In the Christian bible, Acts 1:13 states that when the apostles arrived at the site of the Last Supper they proceeded to 'an upper room'. So the original structure could have been a two-story dwelling or a lodging facility of some kind. The current building, as I've stated, has not been properly dated due to the restrictions placed on disturbing religious sites in Jerusalem, but scholars have offered a number of opinions based on historical events and the design of the structure. This Gothic-style building could have been built by the Crusaders prior to Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem in 1187, while others argue it was constructed after Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II arrived in the city in 1229. Another school of thought is that the Franciscans built the current Cenacle after acquiring the site in the 1330s. What surprises me is the lack of existing documentation regarding the site's construction. But maybe that shouldn't come as a surprise at all. As far as religions go, the murkier the better; it's easier to control the narrative this way.

The 'Upper Room' is a large, stone-tiled chamber divided into six rib-vaulted bays. These bays are supported by three freestanding columns with an additional six columns flanking the side walls. It looked like the sort of place one would hold a medieval banquet. An analysis of the column and pillar capitals (the crowning part of a column) provide some clues as to the building's origins. The Corinthian-style capitals between some of the bays are indicative of a style used during the 12th century before Saladin's invasion. But the capitals of the free-standing columns are not identical; and other differences in the designs of the Cenacle strongly suggest that the structure, at it exists now, was probably rebuilt and renovated numerous times over the centuries. Adding to the mystery is an elaborate *mihrab* (a semi-circular niche that faces Mecca) inside the chamber, providing architectural evidence of the site's Muslim period. It's a head-scratcher, folks.

Alon gathered us in the center of the room and gave us some general information about the site, pointing out several of the more interesting columns, including one from the Crusader era that detailed a carved pelican feeding its chicks, which is symbolic, he said, of the notion of Jesus feeding his flock ('Eat of my body'). Because we were heading towards the site of Jesus' crucifixion, Alon would periodically fill us in on the historical events leading to his death, which is probably why we began our sightseeing at the Cenacle. Jesus had gone to

Jerusalem's Temple and was preaching that it would be destroyed. He spoke about corruption and the inability of the larger Jewish community to accept him as the Messiah. And as his popularity grew, crowds of supporters began following him around, some shouting 'Messiah' and 'Hosana'. This made the High Priest of the Temple very nervous. Jesus represented not only a threat to the established hierarchy surrounding the Temple, but it also raised concerns that the Romans might step in and squash what appeared to be a possible threat to their rule by the growing crowds of Jesus supporters. So a plan was hatched to arrest Jesus while he was isolated from the crowds. And what followed – from Judas' betrayal, to the arrest at the Garden of Gethsemane, to his trial and execution – is now considered established history, regardless of whether or not you believe Jesus was the Son of God.

After our visit to the 'Upper Room' we headed downstairs to visit the Tomb of King David. No one, including Jewish scholars, believe this is the actual resting place of King David. As I mentioned earlier, the site of King David's real tomb is probably located somewhere just to the east of the current Mount Zion, but despite this fact the compound known as the Tomb of King David has become an important Jewish symbol. Located on the ground floor of the Cenacle building, it is believed to be situated in a corner of what was once the Hagia Zion, or the Church of Zion, a presumed Jewish-Christian congregation that existed between the 2nd and 5th centuries. In the Middle Ages (around the 9th century) a tradition emerged associating this site with the burial of the Biblical King David (I'm not certain why, though). And while everyone pretty much agrees that King David was not buried here, the site took on an important role during Israel's early years. The West Bank was annexed by Jordan between 1948 until the end of the Sixth Day War in 1967. During that time, Jews could not reach the holy sites of Jerusalem because the Old City was under the control of the Jordanians. The medieval cenotaph (the burial monument) at the Tomb of King David became an alternate place of worship. In addition, the rooftop of the Cenacle building offered Jews a great view of the Temple Mount. As a result, prior to the Sixth Day War, the Tomb of King David was considered to be the holiest Jewish site in Israel. Today, of course, that honor goes to the Temple Mount.

There wasn't much to see on the ground floor of the Cenacle building. After viewing the cenotaph that marks – for lack of a better word – the *fake* tomb of King David, we entered the Armenian Quarter of the Old City through the Zion Gate entrance. A sign posted near this gate reminds visitors that Armenia accepted Christianity as their religion in 301AD, becoming the first nation in the world to do so. We then entered a section of the Jewish Quarter where Alon led us north along

Habad Street to an area just beside the remains of the southern end of the Cardo, the main thoroughfare built during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods that stretched from the Damascus Gate to the Zion Gate. In Roman cities, this central road was called the *Cardo Maximus* and followed a north-south axis. Known simply as the Cardo today, a portion of it has now been rebuilt as a pedestrian shopping street lined with souvenir shops. The street of the Cardo still continues north to the Damascus Gate and once it passes the Jewish section it becomes the division between the Muslim and the Christian Quarters of the Old City. We stopped for a few minutes at a stone plaza next to the Chabad Synagogue (just above the southern end of the Cardo) while Alon continued his historical narrative of Jesus' final days.

As Jesus' popularity continued to grow, Alon told us, his prophecy of the coming destruction of the Temple was beginning to cause tremendous anxiety for the High Priest Caiaphas. Growing crowds were calling Jesus the 'King of the Jews'. The Romans, meanwhile, were leery about the possibility of any type of insurrection to their rule. Those opposed to Jesus wanted to arrest him quickly, but he was constantly surrounded by large groups of followers. It was decided to grab Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane right after Passover while everyone was still sleepy and a little groggy from the wine. Alon, for whatever reason, did not discuss the role that Judas played in all of this. Jesus was arrested and undergoes harsh questioning at a trial held by the Jewish elders where he is sentenced to death. He is brought to Pontius Pilate, the governor of the Roman province of Judaea, who presided over his official trial and had to decide whether or not to carry out Jesus' death sentence. Accused along with Jesus was a Jewish zealot named Barabbas from another group. During the Passover festival it was customary for the governor to set free a condemned prisoner chosen by the crowds. Pontius Pilate wanted to kill the zealot and spare Jesus because he seemed more reasonable, but the High Priest Caiaphas wanted Jesus dead and, as the Biblical saying goes, Pilate then 'washed his hands' of this Jewish affair as the crowd voted to spare Barabbas. Jesus was then ordered to be crucified. He was made to carry his own cross on a torturous journey through a section of the Old City (the route now called the Via Dolorosa, marked by the Stations of the Cross) to a hilly spot that at the time was located just outside Jerusalem's city gates where he was crucified.

Alon stopped his brief lecture at this point and we continued towards the Cardo, walking in front of the famous Hurva Synagogue in the process, a recently reconstructed temple from the 1700s located within the heart of the Jewish Quarter, featuring a huge Torah ark and a dome roof terrace that offers excellent views of the top of the Temple Mount. We reached the pedestrian shopping area of the

Western Cardo via Plugat Hakotel Street and walked between the rows of vendors and shops. In Roman times, the Cardo was much wider, but today the structures along its path have made the street narrower. Most of what we traversed was covered by either vaulted masonry or metal awnings, protecting the crowds from the sun and rain, giving the impression at times that one is walking through a tunnel. In one section, Alon showed us an opening on the street covered by a metal grill that looks down (maybe ten or more feet) to the actual excavated paved road of the original Roman Cardo beneath us. Civilizations are built on top of one another over time, Alon reminded us, that's why the further archaeologists dig the more they unearth about our past. We momentarily exited the Cardo near David Street and climbed to the rooftops of several adjacent buildings to get a good view of the Dome of the Rock and the upper levels of several other important sites within the Old City, including the white dome of the Hurva Synagogue, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer (built towards the end of the 19th century) and the domes of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the spot where Jesus was crucified). After taking plenty of photographs from this vantage point we went back down to the Western Cardo, continuing north into the Christian Quarter now.

We followed Alon through a labyrinth of covered market streets and alleyways, coming upon the seven-story bell tower of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the process, and reached a small plaza along Muristan Road located in front of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In ancient times the Roman forum (a large courtyard) existed in this area and served as an urban market. During the Crusader period, the Knights Hospitaller used the Muristan Road section as their home base, establishing two churches here (both now gone) and a large, relatively advanced hospital for Christian pilgrims. Over the centuries, Muristan Road became abandoned, and the area fell into neglect until the late 1800s when the Germans began constructing the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer on the site of one of the Crusader churches. Later on, more structures were added by the Germans and the area slowly began to be developed. In 1903, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate purchased the plot of land around the square where were now standing and a developer named Archimandrite Avtimus built a touristic marketplace here on the site of the remaining Crusader church. The square, known as the Aftimos Market, was named after the developer. And while it is technically a plaza, not a marketplace, it is surrounded by colorful shops, restaurants and many wonderful religious sites.

Our purpose in going to the Aftimos Market square was to visit a famous fabric shop called Bilal Abu Khalaf, which was constructed above the ruins of the former Crusader church that used to exist here. The owner, Abu Khalaf, is a Jerusalemite

who imports and sells textiles from as far away as India and Morocco. He is well-known in the city for his craft and makes, among other items, garments and robes worn by religious Muslims, Christians and Jews. In the early 2000s, the Israeli Antiquities Authority excavated the ruins of the 12th century Crusader church beneath his shop. Abu Khalaf had the option of covering up the ruins. Instead, he had a glass floor inserted in his shop so visitors can see the remains of the church, which is pretty cool. We sat in his small store, covered wall-to-wall with fabrics and garments, while he gave us a demonstration on the products he makes and sells, from the fine silk scarves of India to the beautifully hand-sewn Syrian cotton fabrics. Afterwards, we had some time to browse and shop; the stuff was pretty pricey. Most of us just used the bathroom facilities.

From the Aftimos Market on Muristan Road, we crossed St. Helena Street and stopped in front of the entrance into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Inside is the chapel that marks the area of *Golgotha* (or Calvary), the spot where, according to Christianity's four canonical gospels, Jesus was crucified. His burial tomb is also located inside the church. Alon had us gather in the courtyard in front of the building to give us some pertinent information about Golgotha and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, considered by many to be the holiest site in all of Christianity.

Alon told us that in the year 325 the mother of Constantine the Great, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, 'officially' identified the site where Jesus was crucified. Queen Mother Helena also identified Jesus' tomb as being less than 45 meters from where he died and claimed to have found the 'True Cross' of Jesus (the actual cross used in his crucifixion). Her son then built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre around the entire site. Over the past 18 centuries, Christian tradition has accepted this 4th century church to be the official location of Jesus' crucifixion and tomb. Not to raise my cynical head again, but there are some scholarly disagreements to the claim that this is the Golgotha mentioned in the bible. In my own research, scholars have found no consensus as to the exact location of the site. What *is* certain, according to the Books of John, Hebrews, Mark and Matthew is that the crucifixion occurred *outside* the city gates. But the precise location is difficult to pinpoint because following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD the city would be rebuilt and expanded by succeeding empires. As a result, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, ergo Golgotha, now lies *within* the gated boundaries of the present-day 'Old City'. But this does not distract from the site's importance, for it is generally accepted by the world's major Christian faiths that this is *the* location where Jesus Christ was crucified and entombed, making the Church of the Holy Sepulchre a very sacred and holy place, indeed.

Although the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was initially constructed in the 4th century, the buildings that comprise this site today are all rebuilt or restored structures. The original church was burned by the Persians in 614 and restored twelve years later by the abbot of the Monastery of St. Theodosis (Greek Orthodox). In 1009, the church was destroyed again by the Caliph al-Hakim of the Fatimid Dynasty; the same individual who is held as a divine incarnation by the Druze faithful. In 1048, the church was rebuilt by the Byzantine emperor, Constantine IX Monomachus. In the 12th century, the Crusaders carried out a general rebuilding of the church, as well. And since then the site has been continuously renovated and repaired. In fact, I read online that the present-day Church of the Holy Sepulchre dates mainly from the early 1800s. Various Christian groups, including Greek, Roman, Armenian and Coptic churches, control the administration of the church and conduct services here regularly. They don't always get along nicely, either. On occasion, disagreements and even fights have broken out between the various religious groups who administer the Christian sites of the Holy Land . It makes me ponder what Jesus would think of that?

The entrance to the church is in the south transept, through the crusader façade, in the parvis of a larger courtyard where Alon had gathered our group. In the bible, the Apostles referred to the site of Jesus' crucifixion as being *"Golgotha, in the place of the skull*". Golgotha comes from the ancient Aramaic word – "Gulgaltha" – which means 'skull'. In Latin, it is referred to as "Calvaria", from which the English term *Calvary* is derived. In the bible, the evangelists did not refer to Golgotha as a rock or a mount, but in Roman cities a designated area was generally used to execute condemned prisoners and Golgotha was located on the site of an Iron Age quarry, so it's very plausible the crucifixion occurred on top of a rocky mound so people could see what happens to lawbreakers. The rocky mount (or hill) where Jesus is believed to have been crucified is now enclosed within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

We entered the atrium of the church and immediately headed for the stone staircase to the right of the entrance and climbed to the Altar of the Crucifixion. The altar sits atop the mound referred to as the Rock of Calvary; a glass floor covering exposes the top of this rocky mound. An image of Jesus on the Cross stands at the altar. On each side of the altar are two black marble discs in memory of the two thieves who were crucified along with Jesus. As I stood in front of the altar, I took in the solemnity of what I was seeing. Since the 4th century, when Emperor Constantine I built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, *this* very spot is considered to be where Jesus died on the cross. Visitors lined up to pass the altar, kneeling and praying before it, making the sign of the cross, many genuinely

moved to tears. It was a very emotional moment. The altar is ornately decorated with Greek Orthodox icons and imagery, with colorful sanctuary lamps hanging down from the ceiling. Every inch of the chapel's walls were covered with paintings and Christian images. Along the side wall at the top of the staircase, before you reach the altar, there are paintings depicting the *10th Station of the Cross* (when Jesus is stripped of his garments), the *11th Station of the Cross* (when Jesus is nailed to the cross) and the *12th Station of the Cross* (when Jesus, in his dying moments, speaks with his mother and disciples, telling John to look after Mary). I have seen many images of the Stations of the Cross throughout my life and travels, but now I was actually standing on the very site where these events supposedly occurred. It was quite an experience, even for a religious skeptic like me.

After viewing the Altar of the Crucifixion we descended a separate staircase that takes you to the section near the entrance displaying the Stone of Anointing, also known as the Stone of Unction, the place where – according to a tradition that emerged during the Crusader-era – the body of Jesus was laid after he was taken down from the cross and prepared for burial by Joseph of Arimathea. It was on this slab-like stone where his body was anointed and wrapped in shrouds as was the Jewish custom at the time. The stone in question is covered (because in the past visitors would chip away at it to take the pieces home as a keepsake) and the stone covering that exists there now was added after the 1810 renovation of the church. So I'm not sure how authentic this really is. But there were visitors who were completely overcome with emotions as they knelt around it, placing their arms over it in prayer and weeping.

Behind the Stone of Anointing is a wall containing large, modern mosaics depicting three images: Jesus being lowered from the cross, Jesus being laid upon the Stone of Anointing and Jesus being placed in his tomb (these represent the last Stations of the Cross). Directly above this are striking blue balconies with red banners showing the *taphos* symbol (represented by the Greek letters tau (T) and phi (ϕ), which is the insignia of the Greek Orthodox monastic order known as the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre who guard numerous Christian sites in the Holy Land).

From here we entered the Rotunda, the largest domed area of the church, in its center is a small shrine called the Aedicule. Inside the Aedicule are two rooms; one is a small chapel (Chapel of the Stone Angel) that contains a relic from the large rock that once covered Jesus' tomb, and the other is the actual (or presumed) tomb of Jesus. The top of the dome has a round opening that allows rays of sunlight to

come filtering in, creating an almost divine special effects image above the Aedicule. The lines trying to go inside went around the entire structure and was several people deep. They only allow a limited number of visitors in at a time, so Alon told us this was going to be a very long wait. Jesus' tomb is empty with the exception of a stone bench where his body would have lain prior to his resurrection (and subsequent disappearance from the tomb). Our group somberly assessed the size of the crowds. Most of us came to the same conclusion: it was going to take a large chunk of our time just to see what is essentially an empty stone chamber, albeit with tremendous significance for the truly faithful.

Another thing Alon wanted us to consider was that no one can say for certain if this was the *exact* spot where Jesus' body was entombed. There is no archaeological or physical evidence supporting this claim. When no one in the group expressed a desire to wait on line for so long, Alon took us instead to a section of underground Jewish tombs just meters from the Aedicule (also within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre) where he said criminals who were crucified were often buried. It is possible, he went on, that Jesus could have been entombed in one of these, *instead.* In fact, he posited, it was more than likely that a condemned person (like Jesus) would have ended up in a much simpler resting place than the one on display inside the Aedicule. Again, this is religion, folks, so…*who knows*? The underground passage was narrow and low (and a tad creepy, too) but we were able to go down there single-file and see several of the empty tomb openings.

To the south of the Rotunda is a stone canopy (the Station of the Holy Women) that leads into the Armenian monastery within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. To the northwest of the Rotunda is the Chapel of the Apparition, reserved for the Latin Church (read: Roman Catholic). There are smaller chapels surrounding the Rotunda belonging to the Copts and Syrian Orthodox religions, as well. From here, Alon led us into the central nave of the church (known as the *catholicon*), containing the main altar of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This part dates back to the Crusader period and is now administered by the Greek Orthodox Church. It is located just to the east of the Rotunda. The catholicon has a dome 19.8 meters (65 ft) in diameter with a beautiful image of Jesus at its center that is situated directly above the transept crossing where the Greek choir is located. In the eastern part of the church, the ambulatory (a covered passageway behind the high altar) leads to several Greek chapels (St Longinus; the Chapel of the Derision) and an Armenian Chapel (the Chapel of the Mocking). These small chapels mostly commemorate some of the painful things Jesus had to endure on his final day and are located to the north of the Altar of the Crucifixion. Behind these

chapels are stairs leading to the entrance of the Chapel of St. Helena. We were not able to see this 12th-century Armenian chapel, which is located in the lower levels of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Armenian faithful do not refer to it as the Chapel of St. Helena but rather the Chapel of St. Gregory the Illuminator, after the saint who converted Armenia from Zoroastrianism to Christianity in the year 301.

While inside the catholicon, Alon had us sit down along a row of benches beneath dramatic painted Greek Orthodox images of Jesus being brought down from the cross. He concluded the narrative he had begun earlier that morning concerning the final days of Jesus and the impact his death had on the world.

Jesus' teachings turned traditional religious thinking on its head, Alon began. God's punishment for the 'original sin' brought upon humankind because of Adam and Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden was that man had to labor harder in life and woman had to go through the *pain* of childbirth. This notion of humans offending God and then having to deal with God's wrath is a recurring theme not only in the Jewish bible but in many other religions, as well. The ole' carrot-and-stick philosophy. The idea is simple: abide by the rules and you'll get your heavenly or earthly rewards…but if not, prepare for the locusts, the droughts, the crop failures, the floods, the earthquakes, the military losses and so forth. And in each instance of God's wrath there is also the notion that God gives humankind *another* chance. Alon cited the biblical stories concerning Noah's ark and the City of Babel as examples of God 'doing away with and starting anew' with the sinful behaviors of his followers. But now Jesus comes along and corrects this notion of 'original sin' by preaching that if you accept him as your Savior, you can still get into Heaven, regardless of your sins. This concept of 'being forgiven' through one's belief and faith in Jesus is an exciting new idea that, as the world has seen since his death, sky-rocketed in popularity. Today, Alon pointed out, the cross has become one of the most universally accepted symbols on earth. Bigger than Coca-Cola.

I was reminded of my own Catholic up-bringing. As a kid, all I had to do at the confessional was own up to my 'sins' and perform a few rudimentary 'Hail Marys' and I was given a stay-out-of-Hell pass. *That*, folks, is a powerful religious tool to have. And how many times do you hear about the convicted murderer on Death Row who 'turned his life over to Jesus' and is now certain of his salvation? In the Old Bible, people like this got spit-roasted in Hades for eternity. So Christianity offered a new, more manageable – and, yes, more *palpable* – approach to Everlasting Life. I mean, who wants to atone for decades or live multiple shitty reincarnations before finding Eternal Peace? Not Christians, thanks to Jesus'

sacrifice on the cross. His death upended centuries and centuries of established religious thinking. The fear of God was replaced by the notion of God's love and forgiveness. And this is probably the biggest impact Jesus had on humanity. That we are, for the most part, essentially redeemable.

We left the Church of the Holy Sepulchre before 1:00pm and headed back to the Aftimos Market square. We had an hour and a half on our own to have lunch and shop for souvenirs and continue exploring in the area before returning to the hotel. I was able to purchase three adorable T-shirts for my cousin Mike's grandchildren (who were being raised Jewish on account of their mom). I also took some photos of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer nearby. For lunch I had a tasty shawarma pita sandwich. By 2:30pm we were back at the hotel. I wrote down the day's events in my journal notebook and took a short nap.

At 5:30pm, we drove to the hilly neighborhood of Kiryat Hayovel located in West Jerusalem for our farewell Shabbat dinner. This suburban neighborhood, which was established in 1952, has evolved into a close-knit community of new families and young professionals looking to move away from the city's more expensive areas. Its bustling streets and lively marketplaces embody the multicultural fabric of Jerusalem. Kiryat Hayovel is remarkably diverse, home to a mix of Jewish, Arab and Christian residents. The middle-aged owners of the house we visited, Liat and Nir, greeted us outside when we arrive, welcoming us warmly into their home where several tables were set up end-to-end from the kitchen area to the living room to accommodate us. The couple's 26-year old daughter (whose name I didn't catch) was also there to help serve dinner. It turns out she worked at the Kefar Blum kibbutz in Galilee where we spent two nights earlier in the tour.

On the drive over, Alon spoke about Shabbat (or Sabbath), explaining that this is Judaism's day of rest. According to *halakha* (Jewish religious law), Shabbat is observed a few minutes before sunset on Friday until about an hour after sundown on Saturday. For Jews, this is supposed to be a festive day free of the rigors and labors of a regular workday, a time to spend with family and to contemplate the spiritual aspects of life. This tradition is rooted in the biblical stories of the six-day creation of heaven and earth when God rested on the Seventh day, the Sabbath, which according to the Jewish religious calendar falls on a Friday. Shabbat is also a time to remember the redemption from slavery and the Exodus out of Egypt, and to look forward to the coming Messianic Age (the period of eternal peace on Earth that will be ushered in by the arrival of the messiah). Traditionally, three festive meals are eaten during Shabbat: Friday's evening dinner and two more meals on Saturday before sundown. In Judaism, the unbroken seventh-day Shabbat

originated among the Jewish people as their first and most sacred institution. Shabbat is taken very seriously in Israel, as one can imagine. Jewish businesses all close down. In fact, I could not fly out of Tel Aviv on El Al Airlines the following day because of it.

After the official introductions and greetings, we sat down for Shabbat dinner. Prior to eating, the husband read in Hebrew a blessing called the *kiddush* (sanctification) which is recited over wine (or grape juice). The Torah refers to two requirements concerning Shabbat. The first is called the *shamor* ('keep it') and this refers to the thirty-nine forbidden activities on the Shabbat (basically, don't do any work), the other is the *zakhor* ('remember it') by making special arrangements for the day and specifically through the kiddush blessing ceremony. After the husband recited the blessing and sipped from a cup of wine, two covered loaves of braided challah bread (representing the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, according to the husband) were broken into pieces by hand and passed around the table. Alon had described the owners as "traditionalists, but not overly religious".

When this part of the ceremony was over, we toasted with sweet wine and settled in for dinner. The family had put out a lovely spread for us. Rice with meatballs, chicken with potatoes, seasoned rice, various salads and plenty of wine. This was our last night together and it was a lively affair. Pat and Tony recited a very funny poem they had written dedicated to Alon and the tour. Alon got up and toasted the group and gave us some unexpected news; he and his partner were having a baby soon (he later sent all of us photos when the baby was born). The group exchanged emails and phone numbers and discussed the tour, in general. Some of us shared future travel plans. It was a wonderful way to end our tour of Israel. The owners were very warm and friendly, and there were plenty of hugs to go around when we left. Before we boarded the bus, we took photos of our driver, Hamoodi, and Alon together. It was the first time I can recall the two of them smiling at each other. Back at the hotel lobby we said our 'goodbyes' to one another with promises to keep in touch. I was in my room by 9:30pm. I jotted a few notes from the dinner in my journal notebook before brushing my teeth and going to bed. While most of the group was going home tomorrow, I still had another day of sightseeing in Jerusalem on my own.

Day Twelve

(The next and final entry will be posted within two weeks…*I promise*!)