

MAGICAL MITZVAH TOUR 2015

Tuesday, June 9

Shalom and B'ruchim habaim (welcome) to Israel!

Some spent the day exploring Jaffa, biking, or swimming. Others rested up after their travels to be ready for our first day of touring tomorrow. We all gathered for a delicious and abundant buffet dinner at the Carlton Hotel in Tel Aviv, meeting and getting acquainted with each other.

After receiving instructions for tomorrow's activities, most of us went to the roof of the hotel to take in the magnificent panoramic view of Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean, as the sun set and the lights around the city flickered on.

Lila Tov and chalamot paz (goodnight and dreams of gold).

Wednesday, June 10

We enjoyed an expansive and delicious Israeli breakfast in the hotel dining room overlooking the Mediterranean. Early morning surfers, parasailers and paddle-boarders enhanced the view. Our group, punctual and enthusiastic, boarded the bus to head south to Tel Moresha and the Dig for a Day experience. We learned about the excavation process and then got busy with picks and shovels, digging for ancient treasure. Some of us assisted in two very exciting finds: a perfume bottle in its entirety and a dish, broken into thirds, but with all the pieces complete. The archaeologists taught us about the site and its Greek inhabitants, who were eventually conquered by the Maccabees. Although we had to relinquish the pieces we found, we were able to take some discarded shards as souvenirs. The archaeologist suggested we place those shards next to our Chanukah menorahs to remind us that the story of Chanukah is about real people and a real place. After part of the group went spelunking in some very narrow and tight caves, we returned to the bus for our ride to a "stayin' alive lunch," which was actually given high scores!

Next, we visited the National Tank Museum in Latrun, paying our respects at the Memorial Wall to fallen members of various tank brigades throughout the State's history.

The last stop of our day was Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, the site of the signing of the Declaration of the Creation of the Jewish homeland on May 14, 1948. A very moving presentation and short film gave us an idea of the emotional importance of that moment to millions of Jews around the world.

A "sababa" first day of touring ended and we all went our separate ways for dinner and packing to leave for the ride north to the Galilee and Golan Heights in the morning. Lila Tov.

Thursday, June 11

This Magical Mitzvah Tour group set a new record for punctuality! On a hotel checkout day, of all days, every single person was on the bus and ready to go two minutes early!

We said "I'hitraot" (until we see you again) to Tel Aviv and headed east toward the Green Line. We were amazed that after traveling only 11 miles, we reached what was the border with Jordan prior to 1967. We traveled on a road that was lined on both sides by security fences, beyond which lie West Bank Arab villages and Jewish settlements. One of these settlements, Alpei Menashe, has a lookout spot where we had a panoramic view of Tel Aviv, Netanya, and Ashdod, as well as other villages and settlements (Arab and Jewish) surrounding the Plains of Sharon. It gave us a concrete idea of what is being discussed on the news when they speak of settlements. Alpei Menashe's 2500 residents did not move there for radical, ideological reasons. Most of them had the dream of a single-family house outside the densely populated cities of the coast and the government incentives to move there gave them the opportunity to realize that dream.

Our bus then turned westward again to travel north to the site of the ancient ruins and modern city of Caesarea. We learned about the ancient port and city built by Herod under the Roman rule of Palestine, the land now known as Israel. We were amazed by the engineering feats of the ancients, who built a magnificent harbor and a city which included within its borders an amphitheater, hippodrome, two swimming pools (freshwater and sea water) and a temple to honor the goddess Roma and Caesar Augustus. Over the next centuries, the area changed hands to the Byzantines, the Muslims and finally the Crusaders. Destroyed by earthquake and centuries of warfare, Caesarea lay buried until excavations began in the early 20th century to reveal this magnificent place. We were treated to the sight of a display of some of the 2800 gold coins discovered just four months ago by scuba divers in the ruins of the ancient harbor. After a leisurely lunch overlooking the sea, we were treated to a surprise concert in the rebuilt amphitheater.

We completed our day's travel, arriving at Kibbutz Nof Ginosar on the shores of Lake Kinneret, our home for the next three nights. After a refreshing dip in the sea or pool, we gathered in the lobby to board the bus for dinner. But a surprise awaited us. We walked to a dock and boarded a boat for an hour-long ride to Deck's Restaurant in Tiberias for an amazing meal and surprise tribute to our b'nei mitzvah, followed by joyful dancing.

Have we really been together only two days? What will tomorrow bring?

Friday, June 12

After enjoying our first kibbutz breakfast, we boarded the bus for Safed (Tsefat) in the hills of the Galilee.

Safed is one of the four holy cities of Israel, based on its history as the home of Jewish mysticism and Kabbala. The other three are Hebron, the burial place of Abraham and Sarah; Jerusalem, the heart of the

Jewish people; and Tiberias, the post-biblical home and burial site of many rabbis and Talmudic scholars. Our driver skillfully maneuvered his way along the narrow streets of Safed, meant for donkeys, not buses.

The city was filled with many tourists and residents on a lovely Erev Shabbat morning. Our tour began with a visit to the Ari Synagogue, where our rabbi gave us a lecture on the history and somewhat complicated nature of Kabbala. We then spent a couple of hours contributing to the economy of Israel by shopping for art, tallitot, jewelry and candles---all created domestically by Israeli artists and artisans.

We left Safed and rode west toward the Ben Ammi Moshav to have lunch and experience the workings of a goat cheese farm. But we had to work for our lunch! We each rolled out the dough for our own pita, watched it bake in a wood-fired oven, and were then treated to platters of various types of goat cheese, fresh vegetables and salad, olive oil with zatar (hyssop) and even Israeli Nutella. Coupled with fresh lemonade, this all made for a very refreshing picnic lunch. The third generation owner of the farm then gave us a tour, which included bottle-feeding some of the baby goats. Some brave souls, including our b'nei mitzvah, had the chance to milk some of the goats.

Our last stop of the day was an ice cream shop in Tarshicha, but not just any ice cream shop. Tarshicha is an Arab town which is half of the joint municipality with Maalot, a Jewish town. They have many cooperative projects and businesses---proof that Arab and Jewish Israelis can cooperate and live together in harmony. The ice cream shop opened a year ago and is owned and managed by an Israeli Jew and an Israeli Arab. Buza (the Arabic word for ice cream) will open a branch in Tel Aviv soon.

As the sun began to set, we gathered on the lawn outside the Nof Ginosar guest house to participate in a Kabbalat Shabbat service. Everyone shared their thoughts about the trip so far, why they came on the Magical Mitzvah Tour and what they hope to take back home with them. We sang a few Shabbat melodies and then returned to the dining room for our festive Shabbat meal. Shabbat Shalom and Lila Tov.

Saturday, June 13

Shabbat Shalom! We left Nof Ginosar for the day and began our ascent to the Golan Heights. During the ride, we passed former Syrian bases now being used by the IDF. We also heard about the pivotal role played by famous Israeli spy Eli Cohen, whose suggestion to the Syrian generals to plant eucalyptus trees at each bunker to provide shade for the soldiers helped the Israeli Air Force locate and destroy those bunkers early in the Six-Day War of 1967. From a distance, we saw the sophisticated monitoring systems used by the Israelis throughout the Golan to keep track of Syrian activity as far away as Damascus.

Our first stop was Kibbutz El Rom, whose two main sources of income are from fruit crops (apples and cherries) and their business of providing film and television subtitles. We were privileged to watch a 20-minute documentary with actual footage from the pivotal tank battle that took place during the first three days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The site of this battle, Valley of Tears, is only kilometers away

from El Rom. An Israeli tank battalion, outnumbered 11 to 1 by Syrian tanks, managed to hold them off until assistance from reserves arrived, despite numerous fatalities and injuries. Without their bravery and endurance, the Galilee might easily have fallen under Syrian control, with dreadful consequences for the State of Israel.

Appropriately, our Shabbat morning service was held at the Valley of Tears memorial site dedicated to those who lost their lives there. We were reminded of all those who came before us, upon whose shoulders we stand. Sadly, only several kilometers away, across the Syrian border, battles were taking place during our service. We could hear the explosions as we prayed for peace.

After an opportunity to climb on some tanks and take photos, we boarded the bus toward our next destination---lunch. What a gourmet treat! A beautiful and delicious Mediterranean meal of falafel, pita, salads and all the fixings was served on china plates and white tablecloths. We were energized for our next activity: jeep rides with a competitive edge. We were divided into teams and assigned specific missions, as we were guided off-road by expert jeep drivers. Popsicles and a medal ceremony topped off this creative experience.

But the day was not over! Rafting on the mighty Jordan River was next. Although the changing room atmosphere left a little to be desired, everyone agreed that the refreshing float capped off a great day.

Because we hadn't eaten since lunch, bags of snacks and cookies were passed on the bus as we rode back to Nof Ginosar. After some "free" time to shower, relax and prepare for our checkout tomorrow, we ended Shabbat with Israeli dancing, Havdalah, a delicious barbecue buffet and a bonfire/marshmallow roast. Another highlight of the evening was a special dance presentation by our Magical Mitzvah Tour newlyweds. Shavua Tov and southward to Masada and the Dead Sea!

Sunday, June 14

We bid farewell to Nof Ginosar and northern Israel. Our bus route took us through the city of Tiberias, where we passed some ancient rabbinic tombs and the Kinneret Cemetery, where many of the very early pioneer settlers who came to Palestine at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries are buried. They faced many hardships, including malaria, but they made their dream of helping to create a homeland for the Jews a reality. We owe them a great debt of gratitude.

We traveled along the road that follows the route of the Jordan River as it flows from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. This is the 3800-mile Great Syrian-African Rift, which was created millions of years ago by massive earthquakes and runs from Syria to Lake Victoria in Africa. It forms the eastern border of Israel with Jordan. At one point, we passed through a checkpoint that marks the post-1967 border of the disputed territories, West Bank or Judea/Samaria---all names for the same area--- and rode many kilometers until we crossed the Green Line again to re-enter pre-1967 Israel very close to Masada.

We felt the desert heat as soon as we got off the bus at Masada. After lunch and a short film describing the events that took place atop the fortress in the First Century C.E., we boarded the cable car to ascend

Masada for our b'nei mitzvah's touching tallit dedication ceremony. All of us made a pledge offered by the rabbi, which included promises to remember this trip, honor our Jewish heritage and continue to grow Jewishly after we return home.

Our hotel was a cool and welcome sight after our day in the hot sun. Until we reassemble tomorrow morning for our journey to Jerusalem, each family is on its own to enjoy the Dead Sea, swimming pool and spa facilities.

Monday, June 15

Another record breaker for the 2015 Magical Mitzvah Tour! For the first time in our many years of checking out of hotels at the Dead Sea, this was the first time everyone boarded the bus on time. As a reward, we made a surprise stop at the Ahava outlet shop in Mitzpe Shalem. Within an hour, we increased Israel's economy by many percentage points.

Bags of lotions, creams, sprays and more filled the overhead racks of the bus. Our family and friends at home will be receiving lots of wonderful gifts of Dead Sea products.

Stop number two of the day was Eretz Bereishit (Genesis Land), a recreation of an encampment during Abraham's time, complete with an explanation by Eliezer, Abraham's servant, of life in those days. We were treated as honored guests because of the mitzvah of hospitality widely practiced in ancient times. A delicious lunch, served in Abraham's tent, was a highlight; but camel rides for all those willing (and some reluctantly willing) to brave the bumpy standing and kneeling of the camels were unforgettable moments of the afternoon.

Our ascent to Jerusalem was punctuated with beautiful views of the "settlement" of Maale Adumim and the eastern side of the city of Jerusalem, as well as the cantor's magnificent medley of songs about the Holy City. Our driver maneuvered through busy afternoon traffic and we arrived at the Haas Promenade overlook for a panoramic view, photo ops and Shehecheyanu. Tears flowed as first-timers and those who have visited before were moved by the significance of where we stood---a place our ancestors only dreamed of seeing.

We checked into our hotel, which will be our home for the next week, and had dinner on our own. Tomorrow the Old City awaits us.

Tuesday, June 16

A beautiful breakfast buffet awaited us this morning, as well as optional outdoor seating on the patio in the magnificent morning air of Jerusalem. After enjoying our meal, we boarded the bus for the Old City, riding by a number of religious sites of various faiths as we circled the ancient city walls.

A tour of the underground Rabbinic Tunnels was our first activity. While we waited our turn to enter, some group members took the opportunity to approach the Kotel for personal prayer and meditation.

The Tunnels tour gave us a fascinating glimpse into the immense structure that supported the Temple Mount and the history of the layers beneath, from the over 2000-year old stones of the retaining walls to the dozens of arches constructed by the Ottomans 700 years ago to support their homes, schools and shops, to the cisterns and aqueduct built to bring life-saving water to the city's residents.

After emerging from the Tunnels into the Christian Quarter and wending our way through the Arab market, we gathered for the Tefillin ceremony on the Southern Steps. Our b'nei mitzvah were the first to put on Tefillin and climb to the top of the same stairway which pilgrims in the time of the 1st and 2nd Temples ascended during the three holiday pilgrimages of Pesach, Shavuot and Simchat Torah. After they quietly offered individual and private prayer of thanksgiving, other members of the group, male and female, followed. For some, it was their first opportunity to perform this mitzvah.

We then made our way to the Rova (the Jewish Quarter) for a few hours of shopping and lunch on our own. We reconnected for our walk through the Jewish Quarter to the bus, viewing several points of interest along the way.

Some of the group returned to the hotel for a little relaxation before dinner on our own. Others, exiting the Old City through the Zion Gate, walked to the Ir David Archaeological Dig. We watched a 3D film about the ancient City of David. The dig is the disputed site of King David's palace. We saw ruins of a wealthy man's home with an indoor toilet. Archaeologists examining remains determined what was eaten during the siege of the city. We descended Warren's Shaft, named after famed British archaeologist Charles Warren, where David is reputed to have attacked and conquered the Jebusites to gain control of the city. We then could choose to walk through dry or wet tunnels leading to Silwan Pool, the freshwater source for Jerusalem that flowed on the aqueduct we saw earlier in the Rabbinic Tunnels.

The rest of the group then returned to the hotel for dinner on our own and to prepare for Laundry Day!

Wednesday, June 17

Our day began with a mitzvah project. Two representatives from A Package from Home, an organization that provides support to "lone soldiers" (those who have made Aliyah on their own and have no family in Israel) spoke to us about how important this project is. (The founder actually attended Temple Emanuel-El on Miami Beach as a young girl). We filled four large trash bags with packages containing toiletry items and underwear that our group had brought with us.

Our bus then took us to perform another mitzvah: a visit to Yad L'Kashish (Lifeline for the Old), a workshop which provides support for indigent, needy, elderly immigrants. They arrived in Israel past their wage-earning years, so are ineligible to receive pensions here. Although many were respected professionals in their previous homelands, they were unable to bring pension funds with them from those nations. In the workshops at Lifeline, they are taught to create a variety of crafts, as well as bookbinding; they receive breakfast and a hot lunch six days a week; they earn enough money to pay for basic necessities; if they don't arrive at work, someone checks on them; and most importantly, they are treated with dignity and honor and have the opportunity to socialize with peers. After touring the

workshops, we supported the agency by shopping in the store which features all of the items created by the elderly.

Our next mitzvah was paying our respects to many of Israel's fallen leaders and members of the military at Mt. Herzl, Israel's national cemetery. Many leaders of the State are buried here, as well as thousands of those members of the military who died during active or reserve duty. Although it has a solemn purpose, the cemetery is beautifully landscaped and the graves are lovingly tended to offer a peaceful place for mourners to remember their loved ones.

We rode through the city to Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, which is located on what was the Jordanian border pre-1967 and sustained much shelling in those years between 1948 and 1967. We enjoyed lunch and a view of Bethlehem, then had the choice of returning to the hotel or shopping in the city center.

Before having dinner on our own, we were briefed about Women of the Wall to prepare for our participation in Rosh Chodesh services at the Kotel tomorrow morning. After dinner, we reassembled to attend the Sound and Light Show at the Tower of David. This computer-generated spectacle projects vignettes of various time periods from Creation through all of Jerusalem's history on the stone walls of the Tower.

We were all ready for a good rest after another "sababa" day in Jerusalem!

Thursday, June 18

This day is difficult to capture in mere words. For about half the group, it began with a 6:15 a.m. ride to the Old City to participate in the Rosh Chodesh prayer service at the Kotel with Women of the Wall, a group that has been fighting for equal religious access and privileges at the Kotel for over 26 years. Several husbands of our female participants supported us with their presence from behind the fence of the women's section. Although there were hecklers among the ultra-orthodox women around us, the Israeli police stood between us to discourage provocative behavior and language. It was a moving and spiritual experience to be led in prayer and song by several women, but the highlight was when the smuggled Torah scroll appeared and was carried for the Hakafah. Our bat mitzvah was given the honor of the second Aliyah and we were all so proud to witness this historical occasion of a young woman being called to the Torah at the Kotel, in addition to a group of progressive Israeli women who were called as a group.

After returning to the hotel for a "late" breakfast, the entire group reassembled to visit Israel's Holocaust Museum and Memorial, Yad Vashem. We each toured the museum at our own pace to view artifacts, historical documents and video testimony of survivors that vividly and painfully described the Nazi era from its inception to its ultimate defeat. We gathered where the museum exit opens onto a magnificent vista of West Jerusalem and then visited the Children's Memorial as a group.

After lunch in the Yad Vashem cafeteria, we headed southwest to the Ayalon Institute near Rehovot, also known as the Bullet Factory, where we journeyed back in time to pre-state Israel. Our guide amazed

us with the story of the courage and determination of a group of Haganah members who risked their lives for three years, clandestinely manufacturing 2.5 million bullets for those fighting to create the State of Israel, under the very noses of the British Army.

A few people took a van back to the hotel to rest up for tonight's bike ride, while the rest of the group continued on to Sderot, a development town on the Gaza Strip border which has been the site of thousands of rocket attacks, both Kassams and Katyushas. Our first visit was to the Indoor Playground built and supported by the Jewish National Fund (JNF). This 25,000 square foot facility was built to provide a safe environment for the children of Sderot to play and escape the terror of constant rocket barrages from Gaza. The building's exterior shell is constructed of steel and cement and can withstand a direct hit. All the rooms on its perimeter are safe rooms to which the children and their parents can escape when the Red Alert (Tzeva Adom) is sounded. However, they only have 13-15 seconds to reach those shelters from their locations throughout the playground. Equipment has been modified to facilitate this; for example, the rock climbing wall is horizontal instead of vertical to minimize the time it takes to jump off. A carousel was vetoed by the IDF because it would take 25 seconds to stop its movement--not enough time for riders to get to the shelters. Of course, there is an indoor soccer field and basketball court. We were all amazed by the creativity and ingenuity evident in this facility which serves the citizens of Sderot and the surrounding area. It was built and is maintained totally through JNF donations and a minimal entrance fee. This fee is waived during times of crisis and financial assistance is quietly given to those families without the financial means to afford even the minimal fee. Psychological services are also available to those who suffer from PTSD and other crisis-induced issues.

We left the playground to ride a very short distance to an overlook where we could see the skyline of Gaza City a few miles away. Across the road in front of us was the Israeli patrol road between Sderot and No-man's Land. In the distance we spotted an Israeli intelligence balloon, gathering information about activity on the other side of the border. As we rode through the town, we noticed that each home has a concrete and steel shelter. There are shelters at each bus stop, commercial building and at many locations in between. For the residents of Sderot, it is imperative to know where the closest shelter is at all times. However, the 25,000+ residents go about their daily lives despite the constant undercurrent of danger.

Our final stop in Sderot was the Magen David Adom Emergency Center, where we learned about the sophisticated medical emergency response available in this area and all of Israel.

Most of us ended a very long, but extraordinary, day of unforgettable experiences when we returned to Jerusalem at 8:30 in the evening. We gave our driver and guide a raucous cheer for their above and beyond work with us today. But for a brave group of 9 (accompanied by our ever-willing guide), the day was not over. At 10:30 they set out on a 2 1/2 hour bike tour of Jerusalem by night. This included a surprise element of witnessing a marriage proposal in the Old City.

Lila Tov and sleep well.

Friday, June 19

Most of the group boarded the bus for a morning of exploring neighborhoods of Jerusalem through competitive games. We learned about the historical development of these areas and the people who live there. We then walked through the open air market of Mahane Yehuda, savoring the sights and smells of this bustling place on a Friday morning, as Jerusalemites shopped in preparation for Shabbat. Some of us sat down to eat lunch, while others purchased items at various stalls to munch on at leisure. Families went their own ways, either staying on at the market, shopping in the center of town or returning to the hotel for relaxation, a swim and preparing for Shabbat.

We all gathered in the lobby to ride to the Kotel for Kabbalat Shabbat services. As we rode through Arab East Jerusalem, crowds were heading into the Old City's Arab Quarter. Muslims are observing the holiday of Ramadan, a 30-day period when they fast from dawn to sunset. Each evening they eat a festive meal, so we saw families laden with food in preparation for their celebrations.

The plaza in front of the Kotel was filling with diverse groups and individuals: ultra-orthodox men in their fancy headwear (schtreimels); yeshiva boys singing as they walked; families with children in strollers; tourists like ourselves, both Jewish and Christian. We separated for our prayer services on the men's and women's sides and then had an opportunity to move close to the Kotel for private meditation and/or placing notes in the Wall.

Some walked back to the hotel, while the rest returned on the bus. We gathered in a private room for blessings and a satisfying Shabbat dinner, during which we enjoyed our conversation with family and friends, some of whom we met only 10 days ago.

Another full day of new experiences came to an end. Lila Tov and Shabbat Shalom.

Saturday, June 20

As Shabbat should be, today was a relaxed day. A late wake-up call was followed by an optional visit to the Israel Museum and a tour of the Old City's Christian Quarter. The group was impressed by the quantity and quality of the museum's collections and, of course, by the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit. We had plenty of time to enjoy a Shabbat walk and/or swim before preparing ourselves for the evening's festive B'nei Mitzvah service and celebration.

Once again, our group made history. This was the first Magical Mitzvah Tour service to be live streamed on Temple Beth Sholom's website. Family and friends around the globe who could not be with us in person were able to participate virtually in this wonderful life cycle event, marking the transition of 6 children to young adulthood. Many of us received congratulatory texts and emails, including "selfies" of people watching on big screen TVs. The beautiful setting in the gardens of the Hebrew Union College (the Reform Movement's rabbinic and cantorial seminary) added to the magic of the service. Each of the B'nei Mitzvah read from the Torah and gave a touching speech about what the experience of being in

Israel meant to them. Following Havdalah under the stars, we celebrated with a delicious meal and dancing.

Since many people had plans to depart early in the morning, this was our opportunity to thank our guide and driver and give "Bon Voyage" hugs to each other. Our fabulous and unforgettable Magical Mitzvah Tour has come to an end. We already look forward to a reunion when we can share photos, videos and memories of this amazing journey we have shared.

SHALOM and L'HITRAOT!!