

A Journey Through Israel:

A Clearer View of a Complex Land for One Arizona Town's Leaders

Community leaders from the Prescott, Arizona vicinity returned recently from the Greater Prescott Leadership Mission to Israel, a nine-day educational tour made possible by the America-Israel Friendship League (AIFL) and the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Prescott (JCF). The delegates represented both City of Prescott and Yavapai County officials; local educators, clergy, and social services, and businesses in the Prescott and Prescott Valley areas.

The October trip, funded entirely by the nonprofit JCF and hosted by the AIFL, was patterned after other AIFL leadership missions that have taken forty-six Attorneys General, representing thirty states, to Israel since 1988. The Greater Prescott Leadership Mission was the first to occur in a pilot program developed by the AIFL, in which leaders from small U.S. communities will be offered the opportunity to experience what had, until now, been available only to such entities as the National Association of Attorneys General, the National Council of Churches, noted journalists and renowned Middle Eastern scholars.

In Tel Aviv the Arizonans were welcomed by Major General (Ret.) Danny Rothschild, Deputy Chairman of the AIFL Board, who explained some of the complexities of life, from the social to the economic, in a small democratic state surrounded by extremist influences from multiple factions. "Ask a Palestinian, 'What do you want from peace?' and he'll reply, 'Less Israeli soldiers; lift up my lifestyle - I need work and housing,'" said Rothschild. "And when our soldiers left, the quality of life for Palestinians declined by about twenty-five per cent."

He recalled how the impacts of Hezbollah were "minor" in the mid 1980s, but that over time they began purchasing pharmacies and clinics to provide free services to the poor, which had the desired effect: More votes for Hezbollah; more impoverished Muslims enticed toward those movements that value dictatorship over democracy, fueling and expanding conflict.

At Tel Aviv University, in a meeting with senior researcher Dr. Eli Sagi, the group further learned of how Israel's regional economy is impacted by the ongoing threats of terrorism. "While Israel's small economy has an advantage in exports, particularly the high-tech industries, we have a defense burden that greatly limits our economic growth at present," he said. "A new Middle East, one that is more open to tourism, foreign direct investments and further exports, could save the area and secure Israel's future. The economy is dominated by threats of war – we need plans for an economy of peace."

Israel's growing sense of urgency to bring about that peace was further clarified in a talk by Dr. Eyal Zisser. The Director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv, he told the group, "In 50 years there will be 400 million Arabs in the region." Later, during a visit to Jerusalem, the group toured the both the Israel Supreme Court and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They heard from Dave Roet, Director of the North America II Division of the Ministry, who explained that peace with Palestine will not solve the bigger issue in the area - which includes Iran, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. He added that the real conflict is between moderate Arabs and the extreme fundamentalist Muslims, cautioning that they "are willing to fight to the last drop of Palestinian blood."

A trek to the northern region gave the Prescott delegation a remarkable glimpse of what a larger peace between Israelis and Arabs could be. In Gilboa, Daniel Atar, who chairs the Gilboa Regional Council, told the group that a dozen years ago the region's Arab villages and the Jewish settlements were governed under separate authorities. But Atar, chosen as head of the Council, appointed as his Deputy Id Salim, from the Arab village Mokebla, and with the newly formed Council Plenum the two developed an effective form of cooperative government that has made a peaceful, productive way of life reality among the people of the largely agricultural region's Jewish and Arab villages. "We hope to serve as a model for the world on true coexistence between Jews and Muslims," said Atar.

The delegates were impressed by the educational initiatives at Atidim (the Hebrew word for "futures"). The national program operates in 130 middle and high schools for participants

ages 13 to 18, to develop the untapped potential of the nation's brightest young students, many of whom are underprivileged youth. The goal of Atidim is to close the socioeconomic gaps that cripple Israel's periphery by creating equal educational opportunities, such as that now enjoyed by a 16-year-old Pakistani immigrant who is now apprenticing as an engineering student at Atidim while preparing for college to pursue his degree. The student told the group that he "had no promise of a future" before Atidim. "It changed my life," he said.

Prescott's Yavapai College President Jim Horton came away from the trip with a number of contacts he feels may be useful to him in local education matters. Horton said he has "hopes to establish an international faculty exchange between Yavapai College and a university in Israel."

Most all of the Prescott-area delegates had opportunities to speak with their counterparts in Israel: Mayor-to-mayor, lawyer-to-lawyer, educator-to-educator. Pastors Dan Storvick and Lee Wiggins conversed with Rabbis and Christian ministers. Highway contractor Mike Fann spoke with an Israeli road-builder, and came away with a new appreciation for the relative ease with which his crews perform their work here at home. The Fains, longtime ranch family and founders of the Town of Prescott Valley, visited with their counterparts in commercial real estate development, while industrial real estate developer, Steve Rutherford learned firsthand more about the realm of investments in Israel.

The delegation's travels included visits to holy sites on the Sea of Galilee, Tiberius, the Golan Heights, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Masada and the Dead Sea. Some of the delegates also made time to visit the Tower of David Museum and the Israel's Museum comprehensive collection of fine art and artifacts, including the Shrine of the Book and Dead Sea Scrolls. The last three days of the Leadership Mission were concentrated in and around Jerusalem, where the delegates toured Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, and Sha'arei Tzedek, a 500-bed medical center.

At a dinner on their final night in Jerusalem, the group listened intently as Avi Armoni, former Vice President for External Relations at the Hebrew University, talked about the hurdles Israel faces in attempting to find ways to share land with people of such starkly differing values.

Armoni spoke of the difficulties in establishing free trade under the ever-present threat of terrorism - a threat that is leveled from so many different directions on this tiny nation, not much larger than the state of New Jersey. He posed the question, "How do you keep morality in the face of defense and maintain our own values?" Armoni told the delegates that he feels, "having people like you come here, and opening up discussions like these" is key.

Since their return to American soil, the travelers have had time to reflect on their Israel journey.

Horton's wife, Debbie, among the spouses who elected to accompany the mission at their own expense, remarked, "Jim and I will be forever grateful for this experience. Israel turned out to be the very best of all our travels. This was like taking a walk through the pages of the Bible - and from a political and geographic standpoint, I've gained much greater understanding of the complexities of the region and the importance of preserving borders."

Israel's attempts to protect those borders had been evident throughout the group's travels, with frequent sightings of Israeli soldiers and encounters with guards. "While the presence of the military was plain, we never once felt unsafe in any way," said Sheila Polk. "There is undeniably a real need for heavy security in border areas and in certain key locations. Yet there's nothing unusual about seeing young people in uniform throughout the country, as a tour of duty in the military is required of all eligible young men and women of Israel".

Pastor Storvick recalled dining with the pastor of the EICA Church in Jerusalem, who provided his perspective on some of the conflict in Israel, and how difficult it is for moderate Palestinians in the region to cross into Israeli-controlled segments, making it extremely difficult for them to work and shop. "Of course, the Israelis make the crossings tough out of a real need for security," said Storvick. "How else do you keep out terrorists and their bombs? I came away marveling at the determination and ingenuity of the Israelis, and with some sense, too, of the frustration of Palestinians whose lives are made miserable by the fanaticism of some of their own countrymen. It is a terribly complex, multilayered situation which seems to have no peaceful resolution in sight."

Remarked JCF's Harold Greenburg, "Israel's people have a determination to live life normally and they have succeeded in doing so. It is a country focused on the sanctity of life and democratic principles, even though it would be easy to abandon those principles in the name of security. When one begins to understand, how can you not admire these people - how can you not be moved by their ideals, accomplishments, strength and courage?"

After Avi Armoni's remarks at the delegation's farewell dinner in Jerusalem, Prescott Mayor Rowle Simmons recalled telling Armoni, "Our issues in America, and in Prescott, cannot compare to what you have here. You humble us and our work."

Indeed, all of the community leaders from in and around the small town of Prescott, Arizona agreed they felt profoundly humbled after their perspective-changing journey through Israel. They returned with renewed gratitude for the relative peace which we enjoy here in the United States. And they brought back with them a deepened appreciation of what Danny Atar told them at Gilboa: "Together we all teach the importance of creating a model for the world - that all there is in the end is our humanity."

The nonprofit AIFL is a nonsectarian, nonpolitical organization which endeavors to strengthen understanding between the people of the United States and Israel, and deepen the shared commitment to democracy between the two nations. An esteemed group of American leaders founded the AIFL in 1971, among them former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph and former Congressman Herbert Tenzer. To learn more about the work of the America-Israel Friendship League, visit online at www.aifl.org.

"We're so pleased that the Jewish Community Foundation could share the history, humanity and beauty of Israel with our local leaders through this extraordinary learning experience," said President Hess. "The greater Prescott area delegates have joined a very distinguished group of past participants in the America-Israel Friendship League's mission, including our own Governor Janet Napolitano, who traveled to Israel when she was Arizona's Attorney General." For more on the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Prescott, including partnership opportunities and charitable programs, contact David Hess at (928) 717-0016 or visit online at www.jcjpgp.org.

The Greater Prescott Leadership Mission to Israel included Fain Signature Group's Bill Fain, Chairman, with wife, Nancy and Ron Fain, Partner, with wife, Cory; Michael Fann, President, Fann Contracting, Inc.; Tracey Horn, President, Helken & Horn Advertising Agency, Inc.; Dr. James Horton, President, Yavapai College with wife, Debbie; Kathleen Murphy, President and CEO of Yavapai Big Brothers Big Sisters; Yavapai County Attorney Sheila Polk; Steve Rutherford of Rutherford Investments, with wife Sue; Mayor Rowle Simmons, City of Prescott with wife Christa; Ellen Simon, Attorney at Law, Daniel A. Storvick, Senior Pastor, American Evangelical Lutheran Church; and H. Lee Wiggins, Lead Pastor, The Heights Church. Accompanying the local leaders was Dr. David Hess, president of the JCF board of directors; vice president Martin Gottlieb with wife, Luida, past president Harold Greenburg with wife, Edi, and board member Pam Jones.