

Christian Friends of Israel / Anglo Israeli Association
Clergy Study Trip to Israel – 15th – 24th January 2018

*'If you aren't confused then clearly you haven't understood what's going on'
For every complex issue there is an answer that is simple, clear and ... wrong'*

The purpose of this visit to Israel was to give the twenty clergy and leaders of Christian organizations the opportunity to understand the complexities of the religious and political tensions in this part of the world. The packed itinerary over nine days gave us the opportunity to meet Israeli and Palestinian religious and political leaders and to hear their perspective regarding what has become an intractable and long-standing feud between two peoples.

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Tuesday 16th January

1. Save A Child's Heart, Tel Aviv (8.30-10.00am)

Arriving in Tel Aviv late last night, after breakfast we leave the hotel and drive by coach for twenty minutes to a large hospital. This is the first visit of our tour and it is to see 'Save A Child's Heart', a Jewish run medical centre. We are welcomed by Tamar, head of Public Relations. She tells us a bit about SACH.

- A medical centre part funded by the Wolfson Foundation which provides free treatment to children with all kinds of heart problems from across the region.

- Children are referred from surrounding countries and welcomed regardless of race, economic background and religion.
- All treatment, travel and accommodation are funded by the hospital.
- Established in 1996 the hospital has so far treated 4,500 children from 55 countries.
- 25-35 children are treated at any given time.
- Funds for the hospital are raised in Western countries.
- They train medical personnel from developing countries.
- There is no political agenda

We walk through the hospital to the main ward where we are met by Dr Kouri, the Senior Surgeon. Dr Kouri is Israeli and talks in more detail about the sorts of conditions they treat and how to minimise trauma to children and families who arrive from so many different parts of the world. His staff are both Israeli and Palestinian. 'We are happy with any skin colour except blue', he says. We go onto one of the wards to see the children and meet some of the staff.

We then drive to the SACH hostel where children who are awaiting or recovering from a procedure can stay, with accompanying adults. We meet Laura who is Northern Irish married to an Israeli. She and has worked with Save a Child's Heart for 16 years. Around 25 children from around Africa and the Middle East stay at any one time. She introduces us to some of the children, parents and carers.

Tamar's perspective:

At this point a few of us get into conversation with Tamar. She is the first person I have met to properly converse with. Tamar is Israeli with two teenage children, she is forthright about how she sees things, especially when we ask her about Trump. 'Some may believe he is God's gift to Israel', she says, 'but this is the reality. Trump's embassy move is not the way forward. We need help, but not that kind of help; there are so many more things that need to be done before we go on to things like that'. In her view a Two State solution is the only answer. Though she doesn't feel hated by the Palestinians she told us about the time four years ago when she had to run for cover with her two children when the sirens sounded. But she is against the Settlements: 'So much is spent on security and the occupation. This is not the way to go about it.' As we say goodbye she tells us 'I don't usually talk politics on these visits'.

2. Rawabi, West Bank, a new Palestinian city (11am-1pm)

On the coach journey out of Tel Aviv Avihu, our Tour Guide, gives us some background to the West Bank:

- 1.5 million Palestinians and 350,000 Israelis occupy this area of 5,640kmsq.
- It comprises the mountainous regions of Judea and Samaria and is the area held by Jordan until 1967 and then given over to Palestinian rule.
- A 'Green Line' separates the West Bank from Israel, though much of the area is under Israeli control.
- Roads in the West Bank fall into categories A,B and C. A roads are under Palestinian control, B under joint Palestinian and Israeli control, and C under Israeli control. Two thirds of West Bank roads fall into category C.
- Water to the West Bank is also regulated by the Israeli's.

- With these and other restrictions West Bank Palestinians see themselves as under occupation. This is why they refer to the West Bank and Gaza Strip as ‘occupied territories’ whereas Israeli’s prefer the term ‘disputed territories.’

We approach the new town of Rawabi (9km northwest of Ramallah but not yet marked on my Israeli map). We are surprised to see Avihu and Ruth (Anglo Israeli) leave the bus. This is because Israelis are not allowed into Palestinian territory as they are considered by their government to be in danger. George Rishmawi boards the bus and welcomes us to Rawabi. George is the director of ‘The Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement Between People’. He will host us during our visit here and later to Ramallah.

Rawabi:

Rawabi is the first Palestinian new city in the West Bank built for and by Palestinians. Building started in 2010 and it will eventually become a hi tech development with 6,000 housing units spread across six neighbourhoods, housing around 35,000 people. A tour around the town shows homes and flats built of local quarried stone, a sports area, shopping centre, school, mosque – all high up on a hill with stunning views. Most of the clothes shops sell Western designer labels. Many of the apartments appear still to be unoccupied.

Meeting with Bashar Masri, Founder of Rawabi

We walk through the shopping centre and are welcomed into a large community hall where we sit to talk with Bashar Masri, the man behind the whole project. This is what he tells us:

- We have a State in the making. Occupation will end. What will this State look like? A good state has an excellent economy, human rights, good government.
- Rawabi is about the economic development of Palestine. It is a pilot project. ‘It’s a big project’ (largest private project in Palestinian history).
- Ten Thousand Palestinians jobs have been created.
- Jobs in Rawabi will include Research and Development. 70% of West Bank population is below the age of 32 and all speak English. 45% unemployment for young people. ‘This is either a ticking time bomb or an opportunity’. Masri envisages a media village above theatre.
- Masri’s dream is to reproduce Rawabi. ‘Imagine five Rawabi’s in fifteen years: 50,000 jobs for West Bank’s 90% unemployed. A Marshall Plan for Palestine.’
- The challenges of building a city under military occupation: ‘We are not free’.
- Problem of Area A being surrounded by Area C and road access to Rawabi being totally inadequate. His frustration that the Israeli authorities won’t give permission for the road to be widened.
- The question is asked ‘Is Rawabi a good idea whose time has come?’ ‘Yes, but it does take an individual to start something. I say to people, “don’t come to me with good ideas – I have enough of those; come to me with ways these ideas can be implemented.”’
- Rawabi: a private company building a public city. Masri underlines that jobs are the most important issue. He appeals to us to help find international companies who may be willing to invest.

We leave Rawabi inspired and impressed by the vision and drive of Masri, the sheer scale of the project and all that he has achieved so far.

3. Shiloh and Jewish Settlement of Eli, West Bank (1.30pm-3pm)

Leaving Rawabi we drive for half an hour to the Holy Site of Shiloh. The temple ruins here are where the story of Hannah, Eli and boy Samuel takes place. We have a sandwich lunch at the Visitor Centre as we are welcomed by Eliana. In her thirties she grew up in the US and Israel and lives with her family in the nearby Jewish Settlement of Eli. Eliana explains that thousands of years ago Shiloh was the first capital of Israel and that we are in the Binyamin Region at the heart of biblical Israel.

We walk to the site where we watch a short movie depicting the story of Eli and the story of the temple. This is shown in a special cinema with the movie superimposed onto glass looking out onto the real temple site. Eliana tells us a number of stories of those who have visited the site and have received answered prayer (particularly related to couples unable to conceive). We spend a moment at the temple standing together as we read the story of Samuel and offer our own silent prayers to God.

We return to the coach and drive to the Jewish Settlement of Eli. This was established in 1984 and is some 850m above sea level. Eliana lives here with her husband and five children. She invites us into her home and introduces us to her three year old son. 'I have only just cut his hair. We do this for the first time when they turn three.' We stand at the bottom of her garden looking out over Samarian hills. She points out Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal and reminds us of the biblical stories connected to them. Eliana tells us how she and her husband lived in a caravan on various hilltops for ten years before building their own home in the Settlement.

Eliana's perspective:

Eliana emphasises the empty hills and valleys that lie before us. 'There is room for everyone', she says. Just on the next hill we can see Ariel, the largest Jewish Settlement in the West Bank with 30,000 inhabitants. She tells us that, as settlers, they are in danger of terrorism and that during the second intifada (2000-04) friends of hers were murdered. She points to the barbed wire and heat sensitive cameras on nearby towers surrounding the settlement. 'The Palestinian Authority doesn't want to promote peace', she says. She talks of hatred towards Israel written into maths problems in Palestinian school and tells us of a moving incident where she reached out to some Palestinian women harvesting olives on a nearby road (they have permission to do this twice a year).

Eliana has a strong faith and complete conviction that it is her right to live in the land promised by God to her people. She believes the land holds the history of her people and is theirs to inherit – Eretz, the Promised Land. This right precedes and supersedes any artificial borders established in 1967. Friends have died inhabiting the land. They wish the Palestinians no harm. There is room enough for them all.

4. HE David Quarry, British Ambassador's Residence, Tel Aviv (6 -7pm)

We return to Tel Aviv and are welcomed by David Quarry at his residence. David has been Ambassador in Israel for the past 2 years having previously visited the country some 22 times. He has spent 14 years involved in issues to do with the peace process. We sit in his front room with tea and cake as he shares with us his perspective on life here.

- The embassy is here to help Brits in need (Jerusalem Syndrome a known phenomenon!), to promote commercial relations, cooperate with security and work towards the peace process.

- Trade with Israel currently at an all time high.
- UK and Israel share similar security interests as regards terrorism. Whilst there are few incidents at present he sees the general security level as *flashing red* right now.
- There is no real peace process at present and no real contact between Palestine and Israel for some time.
- Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem has caused turbulence.
- Rhetoric hot though violence low.

David invites questions to which he makes the following observations:

- He believes a Two State solution to be the only viable option. Water and refugees are issues.
- Anniversary of Balfour was low key. Seventieth anniversary of State of Israel on 19th April likely to be more prominent.
- Gender balance of conversations in peace process is poor. That he can name just two prominent women in the Israeli government is indicative. There is an organisation 'Mothers for Peace'.
- Britain only supports commerce to Green Line Israel.
- Withdrawal from the Occupied Territories has been seen – Lebanon, Gaza, Sinai. It must be an Israeli decision but it could happen under the right circumstances.
- Successor to Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen)? No stand out candidate.
- 'To the Israeli mind security trumps all'. Is this realistic or paranoid? Wild comments from world leaders (for example Iran's comments about wiping out Israel). The trouble is sometimes people mean what they say as history has borne out.
- Trump is described by David as 'a dynamic factor'!
- David describes working in Israel as 'incredibly stimulating' and a place where 'the clock moves at a different speed.'

Weds 17th January

5. Gaza Strip, Kerem Shalom Crossing (9.30-11am)

We drive south to Gaza passing towns with familiar biblical names – Ashdot and Ashkelon (where David slew Goliath). We arrive at the Kerem Shalom border crossing. Avihu tells us about Gaza:

- An area of land 11km by 51km where 1.8 million people live – 11 people per square mile (Tel Aviv is more densely populated but has more high-rise buildings).
- Fifty percent of Gaza is under 18 and the population is set to double every forty years. 'One massive prison.'
- Unemployment runs at 47% with jobs mainly in health, education, digging and fencing.
- Gaza was ruled by Egypt until 1967. Then after the Six Day War, as Gaza was full of refugees, it allowed Israel keep the land, along with the problem of the refugees.
- Governed by Hamas (elected by the people) Gaza is in a constant state of tension with Israel.
- Rocket attacks on Israel have led to borders being sealed off. Kerem Shalom is the only crossing where goods can come in and out of Gaza and Israel controls the border.

- Tunnels used for transporting materials that could be used for weapons were discovered and these were subsequently bombed by Israel just last week.
- Kerem Shalom border crossing has been built to process 125,000 people (or vehicles?) per day. Now only 150 cross per day.
- People in Gaza are not free so they attack Israel with rockets containing explosives and shrapnel. Israel retaliates, people are killed and the world reacts. Both sides suffer and the cycle repeats itself every couple of years.
- Avihu describes Gaza as 'a hopeless place' and, as an Israeli, says he feels sorry for those that live there.

Meeting with Rami Shaket, head of the border crossing

As we drive into the area of the crossing we are surrounded by twenty-foot upright slabs of grey concrete that form massive barriers. Lorries are parked and armed personnel wander around. We are escorted to a prefab hut with security TV screens on one wall and we are introduced to Rami Shaket who is in charge of the crossing. Rami is a small, wiry man with a greying ponytail. He is clearly the one in charge. I have to concentrate hard to understand his English, but this is the gist of what I think he shared with us:

- Two million people live in this overcrowded strip of land under occupation. They are governed by terrorist groups who collect taxes and will often kidnap people from their homes. At this border crossing our aim is to serve the innocent people in Gaza whilst maintaining security for Israel.
- We are under threat by rockets. Materials used for building weapons are smuggled in through tunnels. As well as Hamas in Gaza, we are also under threat by ISIS in Egypt.
- Young people in Gaza are well educated but have no way to use their education.
- Under Mahmoud Abbas there has been a 50% salary cut so there are two economies. Under Fatah and Hamas the police haven't received their salaries.
- 'Political leaders say one thing to their people and another to the media. The people in Gaza have no hope but Israel but their leaders are too proud to ask for more help.'
- He sums up his mission as keeping the people of Gaza supplied whilst keeping Israel safe. 'With one hand you shake for peace and with the other you carry a gun.'
- Shaket's biggest achievement in ten years: 'I didn't kill anyone and I didn't lose anyone.'
- Of those who live in Gaza: 'We help them as much as we can. At the end of the day I remind them that they voted for Hamas (though it wasn't that much better for them under Fatah).'

Rami takes us out to see how the crossing functions – a massive tarmac area divided up by high concrete walls. Basically, any vehicle that crosses the border must be unloaded, checked and then reloaded again whilst ensuring that vehicles coming into Gaza have no contact with those going out. There is also a conveyor belt running from Israel to Gaza transporting all kinds of materials and supplies. Some lorries pass through a scanner that can identify its contents within ten minutes.

My reflections:

It seems to me that the purpose of this visit is to help us to understand what it means to contain a large group of people you have good reason to believe want to harm you. You must feed and supply them, yet at the same time do all you can to deprive them of the means by which they could attack you. And you must do this under the watchful eye of the International Community.

But why do they want to harm you? Is it because they have stated their intention to do so and therefore you must contain them? Or is it because you contain them that they wish to harm you? Do they fire rockets into your territory because they hate you or because of the way you treat them? Israel appears to be trapped in a vicious cycle that is exhausting, expensive, and endless.

And so back to the question we asked the British Ambassador: Is Israel's preoccupation with security justified or paranoid? Our next visit is intended to help us answer that question.

6. Sderot – an Israeli city under siege (12pm-1pm)

As we journey back up north we stop at Sderot, an Israeli city of around 24,000 people. Just 65km from Gaza, Sderot has borne the brunt of Gaza frustration and has been the target of rocket attacks for the past 18 years.

Avihu points out the concrete sheds dotted about outside shops, bus stops and children's playgrounds. These are bomb shelters. He draws our attention to the concrete extensions added to the sides of the high rise flats that serve the same purpose. 'Everyone must be within 15 seconds of a shelter. When the alarm sounds you must get to a shelter as soon as you can'. Avihu asks us why there are so few people on the streets. It's true; the streets are unusually quiet for a major city. 'If you don't need to go outside then you stay indoors.' Even though there hasn't been a rocket attack for several months it seems the city is ruled by fear. A ghost town.

We stop at a small compound with railings, behind which are dozens of projectiles of all shapes and sizes. 'These are the rockets that have landed in Sderot' says Avihu. A security system known as the 'Iron Dome' intercepts many of them, but some get through when a number are fired together.

Avihu shares with us the stunning statistic that, according to recent studies, 85% of residence in Sderot evidence PTSD. He compares this to 4.5% in a nearby Kibbutz and attributes the difference to the sense of community in the Kibbutz a city lacks – especially when its residence come from so many different parts of the world (many in Sderot come from Russia and Ethiopia).

On the bus, as we leave Sderot and head for the West Bank, Ruth shows us an app on her phone called Red Alert. This provides her with real time alerts every time rockets, mortars or missiles are fired into Israeli territory. December and January have a number of incidents listed. Clearly for Israel rocket attacks are a clear and present danger.

7. Ramallah – meeting with Dr Barghouti, politician (5.00pm-5.40 pm)

Approaching the city of Ramallah in the West Bank, Ruth and Avihu leave the bus once more. They will stay in a hotel in Jerusalem and join us again in the morning. George Rashwami climbs aboard to host us in Ramallah where will stay the night. This is the largest Palestinian city in the West Bank with a population of around 30,000. We are going to the Palestinian Medical Relief Society where we will meet Dr Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian politician who is also a medical doctor. Dr Barghouti is in his sixties and speaks excellent English. This is what he shares with us:

- This is a crucial time in Palestine. For the past 25 years we have been involved in peace negotiations.

- As part of the Oslo Accord the PLO recognised Israel. The PLO was prepared to compromise, assuming Israel would too. But they didn't. They wanted Palestine as theirs.
- The Jewish Settlement and outposts are illegal. The segregated roads mean that Israel has a situation similar to Apartheid in South Africa.
- The distribution of water, electricity and health care all favour the Israelis.
- The Wall is an affront and this has created island cities with Israeli's controlling one small exit.
- Ghandi and Martin Luther King are their role models for their demonstrations. But these are broken up in such a way that shows that 'Israeli's have no respect for Human Rights – 22 Palestinians lost this month.'
- 'Our life has become a life of resistance. We want peace; we are not terrorists.'

Dr Barghouti illustrates his talk with slides showing ever decreasing areas of land under Palestinian control. He is passionate and angry and blames everything on the Israelis. Sadly we have no time for questions. We had arrived late and a Spanish delegation awaits him. But I think back to the slide he showed us of grenades, gas cylinders and rubber bullets used by the Israeli army against Palestinian demonstrators. Both sides display the ammunition the other uses against them.

8. Ramallah – Meeting with Xavier Abu Eid, PLO Negotiation Team (6pm-7pm)

We drive a short distance to another office block where we meet Xavier Abu Eid. In his early thirties, he is a Political Scientist with an MA in Diplomacy. He is also a committed Catholic Christian. He begins by commenting on the recent announcement by Nikki Hayley (US State Ambassador to the UN) regarding funding cuts to the Palestinians. 'I thought she was a Christian – a Methodist', he says. 'Why would she do this?' From what he then goes on to share, these are the main points I noted down:

- You are in a PLO office, but it's a joke. We are under occupation. We have control over nothing.
- After the 1948 ethnic cleansing Christians and Moslems disappeared. The Israeli's withdrew our residency rights and instituted racist laws. Only Jews had the right to return.
- Everything is done through Israel. They want Apartheid. We don't even have control over our own population registry.
- I want a Palestinian State. I am stateless. A Jordanian passport is little more than a travel document.
- Racist laws make it impossible to get Israeli citizenship. I have to be a Jew.
- Oslo was an interim agreement that was supposed to last five years. ABC was the biggest mistake we made but we thought it was for just five years. Recognising Israel was the biggest mistake we ever made.

We ask about how, as a Christian, he views the interpretation of the bible that God has given the land to Israel. He gives a spirited and heartfelt reply:

'Don't use the bible to justify war crimes! All this talk of Chosen People and Promised Land is hard for me. It's strange that 80% of Jews don't believe in God and yet they all seem to think that he has promised them the land. Donald Trump's plans for Jerusalem as capital are in response to an end-times evangelical interpretation of the bible. These

‘apocalyptic visions’ – it’s crazy! I have never read in the bible about the State of Israel and I totally refuse to connect this with the word of God. It is a perspective on the bible that justifies our suffering.’

Xavier also comments on Hamas (not a group I like to deal with) and the Balfour Centenary (what on earth are you celebrating?). He ends by telling us about his Israeli friends who would risk arrest by coming to see him in Ramallah. They would play football together and talk deeply about the political situation. It is this grass roots dialogue that gives Xavier hope.

As we drive back to our hotel, George takes the coach microphone and adds his perspective. He sees Christianity as a ‘religion of action’. There are those on both sides that want to end the occupation. His mission is to encourage non-violent resistance.

9. Ramallah – Meeting with Rev Haddad, Lutheran Pastor (8pm)

Gathered together in our hotel restaurant we meet Rev Imad Haddad. He is in his late thirties and a Palestinian, Arab Christian. In excellent English and with a calm and gracious manner, this is the gist of what he tells us:

- My language is Arabic and I read the bible in Arabic. I use the word ‘Allah’ for God.
- Arab culture came to this land and is part of me now.
- I can sum up the complexity of our situation in numbers: It is only one land. We are two people, something it is now time to recognise and accept. We are (at least) three religions; this is a religious society.
- As Christians here we do not face persecution. The relationship here is different to that in other countries. This is a political problem, not a religious one.
- What you saw today is our reality. The church is part of our society and, as Christians, we choose not to live in a bubble. We have a prophetic voice. We are not naive.
- As Palestinians, we are treated as second class citizens. We are denied our rights and we are denied our freedom. It is time to demand our rights and our freedom as any other citizens of the world.
- This is not politics; it is ‘feeling the burden of the people’. Hope is the ‘already and the not yet’ – seeing the unseen and working towards it.
- We do this in three ways:
 - Education: As Christians we are less than 1½ % of the population, yet we run 64 schools. We create leaders for a better society.
 - A Prophetic Voice: This is like a stone in your shoe that disturbs you until you sit down and attend to it.
 - Empowering People: Through projects that change things on the ground and help people to live, speak out and meet needs.
- I will not allow the bible to bring death to me.
- Jeremiah 29:11 is a promise for the future. We burden God with our own understanding of discrimination. God is God for everyone, not just for the other. How can He be good and almighty if I have to be evacuated?

Rev Haddad invites questions:

- *How can the church bring healing from the past?* ‘90% of the church is refugee. They cannot forget their past.’

- *Alongside being pastoral and prophetic, is the church also missional?* ‘If we knock on doors saying ‘do you know Jesus’, we’re in trouble. Remember the story of the Transfiguration? Leave the chapel and be with the people. Our aim is not to convert but to be with human beings as people. Our mission is for humanity.
- *Have you experienced blessings in the context of suffering?* ‘Many! The joy of ministry! But this doesn’t vindicate the suffering.
- *What sort of prayers do you offer as a church to see an end to all this?* ‘Teach us what love is. To accept the Israelis even if they are our enemies. To recognise the rights of each other. Standing at the check-point for one hour, presenting papers, smiling and saying “Good morning!”

My reflections:

What a day! A population in a prison, a city under constant threat of rocket attacks, an angry politician, a frustrated negotiator, a faithful pastor. It has been a privilege to hear so much expressed from the heart, and all recognising they are in a no-win situation. Yet I am realising that both sides of the conflict airbrush aspects of their story that don’t reflect well on them (I guess we all do that). Israeli occupation must be desperately difficult to live under and their retaliation to aggression sometimes brutal. For Christians it must be soul destroying to see that this is justified by a reading of God’s word that puts you on the ‘wrong’ side. But in Ramallah we didn’t hear mention the extraordinary act of aggression fifty years ago that the Israelis somehow overcame, yet reminded them (as if they needed reminding) that they can trust no-one if they are to survive as a people.

Thursday 18th January

10. Lake Galilee and Capernaum (12-3pm)

For the morning, at least, we are able to leave politics aside as we connect with the roots of our faith. Avihu is taking a break with his family (7 children and another on the way) so Sarah is our guide for this part of the tour. She grew up on a Kibbutz not far from Galilee and begins by taking us to Magdala, a Synagogue on the shores of the lake where, in all likelihood, Jesus would have taught. It is extraordinary to be in the world of the biblical stories we have grown up with and have shaped our life and faith.

We take a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee and see for ourselves how quickly the wind can whip up the waves. We wonder whether it was precisely here where Jesus walked on the water, or there where the storm blew up, or the miraculous catch of fish took place. Was it just there on the beach where Jesus restored Peter around a breakfast fire with the smell of grilled fish? We hold a short Communion service on the Mount of Beatitudes overlooking the lake. We visit Capernaum and imagine Jesus growing up in his home town. We wonder at the remnants of a two thousand year old boat – an almost tangible connection to Jesus’ time.

11. The Golan Heights (4-5.30pm)

We drive for an hour or so to the hills above Galilee and stop overlooking the lake with the hills of Samaria in the distance. We are back to politics and the 1967 Six Day War. This is when Israel not only beat back the seven invading Arab armies but also took possession of new territory, including much of the Golan Heights. The strategic importance of this is obvious, which is why, as other land was handed back to the Palestinians, Israel has done its best to hold onto this one.

Part of the Golan Heights, however, remained in Syrian hands and Sarah tells us about the Jewish Settlements below, claiming they were under constant fire. 'When it was agreed that the land below was to be no-man's land, we thought that just meant militarily. We thought we were still free to cultivate it.'(Really??) In 1981, despite UN resolutions condemning this, Israel occupied the Syrian ridge too and has never let go.

We stay on the Golan Heights looking at the stunning view over the Sea of Galilee until the sun goes down.

12. Shadi Hallul, Syria Maronite Church of Antioch (8pm)

We book into our hotel on the southern shore of the lake. After supper we meet with Shadi Hallul. Shadi is in his mid thirties and adds yet another layer to the political and religious complexity of Israel/Palestine. He speaks four languages: Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew and English. This is his story:

- The Syria Maronite Church of Antioch is in Lebanon and Israel.
- Jews, before being Jews, were Arameans, so we share common roots.
- Abraham was from Ur. All the Genesis characters were Aramean and pagans who gave birth to the Jews.
- Arameans were among the first to receive Christ and believe in him. The first churches were Aramean/Syrian. Peter founded the church of Antioch.
- So the Aramaic church has the same roots as the Jewish people. And Jesus came to fulfil, not discard!
- The churches in the Middle East were the very first here, and the majority, until the rise of Islam in the 7th Century.
- In 648AD Islam took Jerusalem and Christians become 'dhimmi'. We become second class citizens and we began to decline in the region.
- Since then, persecution has continued in Iraq, Lebanon and Egypt. And the genocide continues. 'No more' we say about the Holocaust, but for us (Aramean Christians) the persecution goes on. No one seems to care for the Christians and we don't support one another.
- In 1971 Arafat attacked Christians and they had to fight for their existence.
- Shadi talks about doing military service and later a course in 'Bible as English Literature' in the States. He describes a moment when the lecturer tells the class that Aramaic Christians don't exist anymore. From that moment Shadi realises his calling is to make the Aramean Church visible and ensure its survival.
- In 2007 Shadi formed the Christian Aramaic Association. Its aims are to advocate for the rights of the Aramaic people and ensure Israel recognises its existence.
- Since 2007 they have: persuaded the Ministry of Education to allow Aramaic to be taught in schools, run summer camps in Aramaic, received official recognition of their identity by Israel, and established a presence on Facebook and Social Media.
- Shadi wants to encourage co-existence, dialogue and awareness raising.
- His big vision is to establish a Christian Aramaic town so that the Aramaic Christian faith can survive in Galilee.

My reflections:

The new dimension Shadi brings to the equation is that of a Christian church essentially in support of Israel. This is in contrast to the view of the Christians we met in Ramallah. Shadi

served in the IDF and believes that Israel's stance is justified: 'Israel's problem is that they must protect themselves; they can't be weak. The IDF is strong. It has to be'.

I'm not quite sure what to make of Shadi. Amazing drive and vision, but it seems to me his priority is to preserve, rather than share, historic faith. And to preserve this, not so much in terms of doctrine, but in terms of language and cultural identity. I can't honestly see how establishing an Aramaic town is good for Israel or for the road to peace. In terms of the church, is this more about museum than mission, or am I being unfair? What is clear, though, is that here is another religious group who claims a deep, historic attachment to the land.

Friday 19th January

13. Beth Sha'an – Visit to Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu (9am-10.30am)

Sde Eliyahu Kibbutz is situated in the fertile Beth Sha'an valley about half an hour from our hotel. Sarah, our guide of yesterday, greets us as we arrive and takes us to a meeting room. We admire the display cabinets of stuffed Israeli wildlife before we sit down to listen to Sarah tell us about herself and the Kibbutz:

- Sde Eliyahu is one of 10% of religious Kibbutzim. There are 270 Kibbutzim in Israel.
- Though Kibbutzim have traditionally run on Socialist principles, with everyone receiving equal remuneration, many are now privatized.
- Many Kibbutzim started as agricultural but have now had to diversify in order to survive. Decreased rain and poor years means have affected them.
- Kibbutz factories are now among the most successful in Israel. Here, there is a spice factory and 'Bio Bee' (which we will learn about later).
- With 270 members and an added population of visitors and children, around 750 live on this Kibbutz.
- Everything happens in the dining room! Fun, community, gossip, entertainment, information – the whole of community life.

Sarah has lived on this Kibbutz for thirty years and brought up her family up. But it is a passing world. 'Television destroyed Kibbutz', she says. That and a general world trend towards individualism means that the values of previous generations can no longer be sustained. 'To be a good Socialist you have to be a good Capitalist'. In past generations financial management was often poor, but now, although the dream of equality is no longer alive in the same way, Kibbutzim are much smarter in business and are finding ways to keep going. Those that live on a Kibbutz are considered to be in the top 10% of Israeli standard of living.

Sarah shows us round some of the buildings – the massive dining room, the Synagogue (always built on the highest point of any village or Settlement), the residences caring for the increasing elderly population. We then get back on the coach and head for the fields as Sarah explains to us about their move towards organic farming, long before it became fashionable. We drive slowly through acres of irrigated fields and date palms.

Particularly interesting is their natural form of pest control (every insect and animal has a predator – you just have to find the right one). Their business 'Bio Bee' 'breeds bugs that eat the bugs that eat your plants'. They now breed and export these bugs worldwide, so successfully that Bio Bee is now in the top 10% of start up companies in Israel (strapline: Saving the world one bug at a time!).

My reflections:

As with the Settlement we visited, there is a strong sense of connection to the land. And not just owning it, but working it and being a part of the biblical promise to see streams in the desert and 'the wilderness rejoice and blossom'. The vision behind the movement was really that of Acts 2: *'All believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions and gave to anyone who had need.'* It seems to me that Kibbutzim brought a drive and a sense of community at a time when this new nation most needed it.

But times are changing. Although Sarah has given her life to this dream she knows it is passing. Will she stay on the Kibbutz for the rest of her life? I ask her. She shrugs and smiles. My feeling is, so what if the Kibbutz movement is dying, or at least changing beyond recognition? It has been an amazing dream. And there is nothing wrong with dying. I live in a body that is dying; but that doesn't mean that what I have, or what I have done has not been of worth.

14. Jerusalem – The Western Wall (5.30- 7pm)

We leave the Kibbutz and drive south for a couple of hours. When we arrive in Jerusalem it is raining (much needed) and 750m above sea level, decidedly colder. We look around the Mahane Yehuda street market and buy a kebab style lunch from a stall. We check into our hotel just as the Sabbath begins. This means the lifts are in Shabbat mode, stopping automatically at each floor. To operate the lift would be breaking Shabbat law.

Our guide for this first evening is Ohri, a non-religious Jew in his mid twenties. We drive to the Western Wall arriving around 5.30pm. The Western Wall of the temple is the nearest a Jew can get to the Temple Mount, now the site of the Muslim Dome of the Rock. As Ohri gives us some background I am struck by the intrusive (to me) sound of a minaret calling Muslims to prayer. This really is the place where three world faiths meet (collide?). Ohri explains the different strands of Judaism so that when we go to the wall we can recognise them by their clothing. This is the time to visit he says. It is Shabbat and everyone will be there.

And they are; all kinds of trousers, coats, hats, beards and curls. Men and women pray separately and we go into a long lit tunnel along the Wall, where dozens of men are gathered to pray in different ways. Some are sitting and some rocking back and forth as they chant from their prayer books. I find it quite overwhelming. How strange a faith, any faith, looks to the uninitiated.

15. Jerusalem – A Shabbat Meal (7.30-9.30pm)

We drive a few minutes through the hilly roads of Jerusalem until we come to residential area. We have been invited to the home of Ophir and Sarah and their five children to share in their Friday evening Shabbat meal. We all feel this is an honour and are in smarter dress for the occasion. We remove our shoes as we enter the house and greet our hosts (remembering, as a man, not to greet Sarah with a kiss).

There is a simple but spacious kitchen/living room area and we take our places at the long table set for around 28 of us. Our hosts introduce themselves. Ophir lectures in Hebrew at a university and Sarah is a mother, also training to be a tour guide. Then, with grace and humour, they welcome us and explain how the evening will run. We each have a booklet of prayers with an explanation as to the meaning behind the various elements of the meal. They ask us to leave the lights on when we visit the bathroom, as to have to them back on would be to break Sabbath

Law. They mention, jokingly, that they forgot to plug the electric urn in and now they can't. 'Can we do that for you?' we ask. 'Well, we can't actually *ask* you', they reply, 'but the urn is just over there and if you happen to find the cable ...'

The candles are lit, the atmosphere is still and the evening is beautiful. This is the time to stop, to appreciate, to delight, to rest, and – to – just – be. The prayers, as they bless their children, are especially touching.

There is a point when we all rise to wash our hands. I ask Ophir if they host meals like this often. 'About once a month', he replies. 'We are part of a small company that arranges for visitors like yourselves to share in a Shabbat meal with a local family. They provide the tables, chairs and the food and we provide the home and the atmosphere. It is a great way to share our lives and to foster understanding.' Rather than the commercial element making it less special, I am impressed by Ophir and Sarah's commitment to open their lives to others on a regular basis.

The evening helps me a greater appreciation of the deep bonds that bind Jewish people. Bonds strengthened by ritual. Their faith is absolutely at the heart of who they are and is reinforced by their dress, their sacred books, and their habits and customs that really do set them apart from the rest. Yet, there is a welcome to others and a lightness of touch that is hugely disarming. And it is a lovely, moving evening that makes me wish I could do Sabbath like that.

Saturday 20th January

16. Jerusalem – In Jesus' steps (9am-1pm)

The view over the city from the Mount of Olives is spectacular. One I have seen on postcards many times, but you have to be there. We walk down the hill to the Garden of Gethsemane, then enter the city walls by the Lions Gate. We wander along the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Ohri stops us at various points to connect where we are to the Christian story. Near the entrance of the Holy Sepulchre there is a large stone slab on the floor where people are kneeling, either to kiss it or to wipe cloths over it. This is the stone on which they believe Jesus was laid and prepared for burial after he was taken down from the cross. Dozens are queuing to enter the space believed Jesus' tomb.

From here we visit The Garden Tomb. This is a spacious garden with walkways that lead to an ancient tomb in the rock. It is not claimed that this is definitely Jesus' burial site, but it is a tomb of that era and so not impossible. Run by British Christians, it is used as a place in which visitors can pause, reflect and wonder, and hear the gospel with personal testimony woven into the guide's presentation. From here we visit a museum with a 1:50 model of the old city of Jerusalem, as well as displaying pages and fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls. And then we head to the Bethlehem crossing.

17. Bethlehem – Community Centre 'Beit Al Liqa' run by Johnny Shahwan

We drive to the Bethlehem Crossing and pass through without a check. We pass the Wall on our right and on into Bethlehem. We come to Banksy's Walled Off Hotel and a section of the wall with his familiar graffiti. This was where the 'Alternativity' documentary was filmed by the BBC over Christmas. We come to Beit Al Liqa (House of Encounter), a Christian Community Centre run by Johnny and Marlene Shahwan. Johnny welcomes us, gives us an amazing lunch cooked by a team headed up by his son, and then settles us in main hall to share his story:

- Johnny was raised locally in Beit Jala and learned to speak Arabic, German, English, and Hebrew. His brother was an Orthodox Priest. Johnny went to visit him in Canada, was invited to a church by some Arabic young people he met there and came to faith in Christ. 'I found hope in Jesus'. Johnny stayed in Canada for seven months.
- Bible College in Germany followed where he met Marlene. He felt called to return to Beit Jala and so became a mission partner supported by a church in Germany. His passion was to bring Jesus and hope to a hopeless community.
- 'Since 1967 we've been under occupation. We have lost our identity as people. We are not acknowledged as a country with a government. That is why people are looking for identity.'
- 'I can't go to Jerusalem. The Wall. I can't drive this way, that way or another way. This is why many young people want to leave the country.'
- Johnny and Marlene started with a small cafe. As relationships developed they began a bible study. A church was planted and now has 230 baptized members.
- With land purchased, the cafe has now grown into a large community centre providing day care and programmes for babies and children, summer camps for youth, a guest house, a playground and a church.
- Johnny talks about the Intifada in 2001. 95% unemployment and an uprising against Israel. Militant Muslims used his neighbourhood from which to fire rockets on Israel and many were killed or injured in Israel's retaliation.
- Johnny worked tirelessly to respond to the needs around him. The church in Germany was able to fund food packages. The church became known for its care and compassion and this changed people's hearts and minds about their ministry.
- 'This is a sign of hope in a hopeless situation.'
- He talks about the miracle of expanding the building in a curfew.
- Beit Al Liqa now has 32 full time workers, 100 children in their weekly programme, runs a food bank and serves 100 meals per day. It also runs a thriving work with teenagers.
- All Johnny and Marlene's children work in the ministry with mum and dad, 'choosing to be stuck in this big jail.'

Johnny responds to our questions:

- *Are you seeing Muslims come to faith?* Yes, more in the last five years. I have been called up before the Authorities for evangelizing.
- *Is the government positive about your work?* Yes, the mayor is a Christian and is very supportive of what we do.
- *When it comes to mission, what can we learn from you?* 'Take this message with you: Israel and Palestine are enemies. But Jesus is alive and well in his home town of Bethlehem!'

My reflections:

Johnny and Marlene's extraordinary faith has clearly resulted in real blessing to the community. It seems they have managed to 'let their light shine so that all may see their good works', and in that way earn the respect of their Muslim neighbours. We don't ask Johnny what his views are regarding 'whose land is it?', but hearing him talk about the occupation and describe what he has lived through, I imagine he would share the view we heard from Rev Haddad in Ramallah.

Conversation with Ruth and Ohri on the bus back.

I was interested in Ohri's perspective on Johnny's talk as an Israeli. He said he could acknowledge the good work but was uncomfortable with the 'missionary' aspect, particularly the influence over the children. Ruth agreed to some degree but felt that the overall message they teach is one of love and forgiveness and therefore positive. Both Ohri and Ruth then shared what it was like as Israelis to have just entered a Palestinian Zone. They had decided to accompany us on this visit as the risk was fairly low, but both said they felt uncomfortable during the whole time in Bethlehem and were hugely relieved when we were back in Jerusalem. 'I will only call my mother *after* I have come out of the zone, never before', says Ohri. 'Otherwise she will worry. My big fear is that something might happen to a Palestinian somewhere else and then people realise that there is an unprotected Israeli in their zone. I could then be kidnapped or killed as revenge.' As a tour guide he is allowed into a zone but must sign a disclaimer saying that the Israeli Government is not responsible if he is harmed in any way.

Sunday 21st January

18. Tour of the Western Wall Tunnels (9.30-10.45am)

This tour took us 20 metres or so underground. The archaeology, by peeling away the layers of time, enabled me to gain a greater understanding of Jerusalem's history and why the city is so important to Jews, Muslims and Christians. Mount Moriah, on which the Temple Mount was constructed, is central to it all and the history goes something like this:

- The story of Isaac taking his son to be sacrificed connects the Mount to all three faiths (for Jews and Christians the son is Isaac; for Muslims Ishmael).
- In 2 Samuel 24 the threshing floor King David purchases from Araunah is located here – one of the earliest Jewish claims to the land.
- David's son Solomon builds the First Temple around 950BC. This temple is destroyed by the Babylonians as the Jews are exiled.
- The Second Temple is built in 500BC (not as good as the first one!). Herod rebuilds and extends parts of it in 50BC.
- This temple is destroyed by the Romans in AD as predicted by Jesus. The stones are thrown down but the platform remains.
- Some eighty years later the Roman Emperor Hadrian suppresses a revolt in the region and renames the land Palestine, in order to try and sever connection with the Jews.
- Around AD650 Muslims capture the area and rule Mohammed builds the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, both on Temple Mount.
- A Crusader army conquers Jerusalem in 1099 and, mistaking the Mosque as Solomon's palace and the Dome as the Temple, use them as churches.
- Around 500 years ago Suleyman the Magnificent (Turkish Ottoman) rebuilds the current walls of the old city.

19. Jerusalem – Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial (2pm-5pm)

Following a service of Holy Communion at St George's Cathedral we make our way to the Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem (Hebrew for 'a memorial and a name' from Isaiah 56:5). Before we are taken around the memorial we meet Berthe, an 85 year-old Polish Jew who grew up in France. She speaks to us for an hour and a quarter and this is a summary of her story:

The story of Berthe, a Holocaust Survivor

- Berthe begins by saying how emotional it is for her to speak to Christians, as it was a Christian lady who looked after her for three years during the war, thus enabling her to survive the holocaust.
- Berthe's parents were Polish Jews who moved to Lyon where Berthe (their only child) was born. Her parents were loving, but pre-occupied with running their business.
- When Germany invaded France and attempts to leave the country failed, Berthe's parents sent Berthe (then 9) to a village in the French Alps. There, she was cared for by Madame Macenard, a widow with three children.
- When Berthe arrived, Mme Macenard was given a baptism certificate for Berthe to 'prove' that she was a Christian. Mme Macenard knew, however, that Berthe was Jewish and was prepared to run the risk of looking after her.
- Berthe had her own room with a poster of Jesus on her wall. 'So there we were, two Jews in a room'. She was particularly taken with Marcel, Mme Macenard's 20 year old son, who would become like a big brother.
- As the war progressed, Berthe received regular letters from her parents in Poland. Two more Jewish children appeared at her school. Even though they all knew they were Jewish they never breathed a word. Berthe lived in constant fear of being identified and arrested.
- In 1944, when Berthe's class were preparing for First Communion, Mme Macenard managed to persuade Berthe to 'wait until next year when you will be with your parents'. This was her way of preventing Berthe from having to go against her religion, something that touched Berthe deeply.
- Soon after this, Berthe's mother managed to come to Lyon to see Berthe. One day, while she was sitting in Mme Macenard's kitchen, some Nazi soldiers came looking for Marcel. Mme Macenard managed to intercept them at the gate, thus preventing them from finding Berthe's mother and Berthe. Many years later she would receive the title of 'Righteous Gentile' for her bravery. 'One and a half million children died in the Holocaust. Only smoke left. I could have been one of them.'
- Berthe's parents survived the war, though she lost two aunts in concentration camps.
- In Sept 1944 the Americans liberated Lyon and Berthe returned home. After high school, whilst working for her father's business (rather than going to university), she married an Israeli she met in Lyon.
- She kept in touch with Mme Macenard. Berthe's family would often go to the Alps to see her, so much so that Marcel became like a son to Berthe's father.
- In 1956 Berthe and her husband, with their one year old son, decided to 'make aliya' and emigrate to Israel. 'Suddenly I realised I had been in hiding all my life, but here I was surrounded by Jews. I was free to be myself.'
- When the Suez War broke out, Berthe's father tried to persuade the family to return to France, but they chose to stay. In 1967 the same. Their second son was born.
- In 1971 her parents decided to join them in Israel, so Berthe now had all the family with her.
- The years went by and Berthe's husband died ('far too young'). But now with nine grandchildren she was far from alone.
- One day in 2002, during the intifada, one of her grandson's was killed by a Palestinian sniper whilst in his tank serving with the IDF. 'He was 22 years old and it was the worst moment of my life'. (As Berthe recounts this part of her story, for the first time she weeps).

- At this point Berthe says something that reveals the extent to which, in her own mind, the events of the Holocaust are clearly connected to Israel's continuing struggle as a nation:
 'I thought about my grandson and then of my aunts taken off in those wagons – the shame and humiliation they would have felt [on that journey]. My grandson fought for us to go on being free in our country. Pride in this fact helps me to overcome this pain. These are young soldiers who take on our security so that we can live as proud Jews in our country'.
- Mme Macenard died in the 1970's. Thirteen years ago, at a ceremony at the Pantheon in Paris, she was officially recognised as a Righteous Gentile and awarded a posthumous medal by Jacques Chirac. Marcel died in his eighties.
- When retirement came, Berthe sold her clothing business to work at Yad Vashem. As one of the last generation of survivors she tells her story to visitors such as ourselves.

My message to you is that the story is not over. What happened then can happen once more.'

(A touching footnote to this testimony is that when Avihu, our tour guide, spoke to Berthe after her presentation, he discovered that he knew her son from army days – the father of the grandson that was killed. It turns out that Avihu was part of a group that had set up a charity in her grandson's memory, to support families affected by terrorist attacks. They had commissioned a special wheel chair, making it possible for the injured and the disabled to experience outdoor hiking adventures, which is what her grandson had loved to do).

Tour of the Memorial

After lunch we gather to enter the Yad Vashem Memorial. Alison, our tour guide, points to some trees planted for the righteous. 'That one over there is for Oscar Schindler', she says. Alison is in her thirties/early forties and begins with a sobering statistic: 'If we were to keep a one minute silence for each victim of the holocaust we would be standing for eleven and a half years.'

I wasn't intending to transcribe my notes on Yad Vashem, as the history of the Holocaust is so well documented. But I now find I must. I can't just leave them in my notebook. What the Jewish people experienced at the hands of the Nazis is too recent and too fundamental to their identity for me to leave out. Although I might want to separate the Holocaust from Israel's claim to the land as the basis of their Nation State, after this tour is over I see that it is no longer that simple. These are the notes I took as Alison led us through the memorial.

- In 1933 the Nazi party come to power with the need to restore national pride and looking for someone to blame for their WWI defeat.
- Antisemitism, with its deep historical and religious roots, is re-awakened and takes on a new form. The distinctive physical features of the Jew are emphasised and it is now racial, not religious. Cartoon of Jew as a caterpillar – no longer human.
- Judges, priests, workers – all submit to the Nazis.
- The first concentration camp, Dachau, opens just six weeks after Hitler takes power.
- November 1938: Kristallnacht lasts a week. Jews must wear armbands and, across Europe, over 2,500 laws against the Jews are decreed.
- With the armbands, Jews lose their protection – anyone can now treat them as they like.
- Jewish property is stolen, meaning it is harder for them to escape.

- Ghettos are established as system of extermination. Documentation is later found for 1120 ghettos throughout Europe.
- They are overcrowded so that disease spreads, water cut off intermittently, average 184 calories per day is consumed per person (1,500 considered minimum necessary). Of the 400,000 Jews in the ghetto, only a few hundred remain when it is eventually cleared.
- In 1941 preparations are made to invade the Soviet Union. Realising there will be many more Jews to exterminate the Einsatz Gruppen (death squads) are formed. Jews dig their own graves before being shot.
- Shooting as method of killing is deemed inefficient so six extermination camps are established (Auschwitz being the first). Murder is industrialised. Zyklon B can kill hundreds in ten minutes. Before the bodies are burned they are harvested for hair, gold teeth and false teeth. Ashes are used as fertilizer.
- Meanwhile, in the free world, from June 1941 the allies know about the extermination of the Jews yet nothing is done to aid the Jews.
- Alison tells of her Great Uncle Schmoyle in Romania who buys a ship in order to save Jews. 768 set sail to Israel. The engine breaks down mid voyage and the ship is towed to a Turkish port. They reveal their identity as Jews. The Turks consult with the British as to whether they may be allowed ashore. The British want to keep peace with the Arabs and so decline. The boat is towed back out to open sea. A Soviet ship identifies it as an enemy vessel and destroys it. There is just one survivor. His name is David Stoler. The British do not change their policy.
- Liberation comes on 22nd April 1945. Fifty thousand Jews were liberated but many died as they were so weak. Their first question: Did any of my loved ones survive? 75% found they were completely alone. How do you rebuild your life?
- Alison tells a personal story about her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor. 'I never felt I ever met the person she was supposed to be. But every day when I came home from school she would ask me, 'What beautiful thing happened to you today?' If I replied 'nothing' she would say, 'Then tell me about your day and I'll find one beautiful thing that happened.'
- After the war, those who risk their lives to help the Jews (26,000 – 22 from the UK) are recognised as Righteous Persons (interestingly, Nicholas Winter is not included as he had Jewish ancestry himself and did not put his life in danger). The full list of Righteous Persons can be found on the Yad Vashem website.
- Alison comments on the connection between the Holocaust and the State of Israel. She says Israel did not come into being due to the pity of the nations; Israel was already agreed at the end of WWI. What WWII did was to turn the need to find a home for surviving Jews into an emergency.
- On May 14th 1948 Ben Gurion announces the new State of Israel and immediately Arab armies invade. 60% of Israel's fighters are holocaust survivors. Alison says that this is why Jews feel that Israel is a miracle of God, despite Nazi attempts to annihilate them.
- Yad Vashem records the names of 4,700,000 killed in the Holocaust.

As we exit the memorial, the corridor follows a gentle upward incline as it leads us to a balcony looking out towards Jerusalem – a symbol of hope for the future. We move on to the Children's Memorial in a separate building. This is a haunting experience, with just six candles reflected by multiple mirrors creating the effect of hundreds of lights. The names of the one and a half million children lost in the Holocaust are slowly read out with their photos appearing on screens.

We gather once more outside. A question is asked, bravely yet sensitively: 'We have seen the horrors of the Warsaw Ghetto, but what about Gaza?' Alison says she welcomes the question and is happy to answer. These are her main points:

- The purpose of the ghettos was to lead to death. That is not Gaza's purpose; it is to keep people alive. When the borders were open we faced terror attacks. Israel allows those in Gaza to have what they need to live, but we do not allow what can be used to attack Israel.
- Hamas do not care for their own people and they use funds to build terror tunnels.
- There is only one border between Israel and the Gaza strip. Egypt does exactly the same thing. Why is it not accused?
- I think this criticism is a way the West deals with its own guilt – to push the 'victim becomes oppressor' narrative.
- As Israelis we want two things: peace and security. The question is which will lead to which? The left and right answer this differently.

Alison leaves us with another stunning statistic: Before the Holocaust, world Jewry numbered 18 million; after, there were 12 million. Now there are 14 million. Why haven't they yet returned to their pre-Holocaust population level? 'Because after the Holocaust they couldn't get back to their Jewish way of life. Out of Israel all Jewish communities are declining as they assimilate into the wider culture. There is no incentive to stay apart and demographics mean many can't now find partners from within the Jewish community, so they marry outside.'

20. Jerusalem – Uzi Rabi, Head of Middle East Faculty, Tel Aviv University (9pm-10pm)

It is our penultimate evening and we walk 20 minutes from our hotel to a Chinese restaurant where Professor Uzi Rabi joins us. His intention is to help to understand the Israel/Palestine conflict in the wider context of the Middle East. Prof Rabi is in his early sixties. Sat at our long table, and in a loud voice (and with no notes), he sums up the situation as he sees it in five, concise points:

1. Political Culture

- The Arab spring brought about a sea change. There is no way back. This signified a point of departure from the 21st Century, but there is no way to predict where the 21st Century is headed.
- The ruler/ruled relationship has changed totally due to Social Media. That is now where the pulse of the public is. You need cyber capacity. New Media – you must understand the flow of new media. This is the first time leaders were ousted by the public at large.
- We have had republics of fear – autocracies. One man show. Now it has to be bottom up. There needs to be an information map to see how power flows from where to where.
- I now have PHD students 24/7 doing Instagram in Turkish, Farsi and Arabic. But not in English because this confuses things with Western ideas. We (in the West?) mustn't pass our standard of judgement on them.
- I am now educating students to think differently about how they interact and get to know 'the other'. We are training a new generation in New Media.
- But Globalization is a double edged sword. New Media can also mean Fake News.

2. The Instrumentality of Religion

- This is more of a factor here than in any other part of the world. A never ending story in the Middle East. What works in the West does not work here!
- Religion tears up society, society from within. Compare Egyptian leaders Morsi and Sisi. For Morsi religion is a main pillar whereas Sisi takes the opposite view – it is a part but not fundamental.
- If there were a Palestine, what sort of Palestine would it be, secular or Islamic? To what extent can you dialogue or interact with these different views? If you don't factor it in you will have civil war.

3. Failed States

- Some States are artificial by nature: Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan – a Western concoction. These States were forged to suit Western interests, not forged in alignment with history. Kurds and Arabs at loggerheads. Today Iraq in fragmentation. Sunni, Shia, Kurds and Arabs.
- A British Politician in 1921, when asked about democracy in the Middle East remarked, 'We will teach them!' Now we're back to the future (The title of Prof Rabi's new book).
- In recent discussion with Western students, they commented that religion may have been important once but this was swept away by various secular revolutions. But this is not the case in the Middle East. Here primordial identities come to the fore. What counts is the tribal, ethnic and religious identity. This is a 20th century mindset.
- In Middle East nation state is only of secondary importance.

4. The Changing of the Guard

- The imams are in control. We have been focussed on ISIS while Muslim States build up power. Iranians and Turks are the dominant power in the Middle East.
- Turkey and Iran get stronger as the get Arabs weaker. For Arabs, it is the beginning of the end. Jews are now not the one and only enemy – that is a very Jewish idea!
- What the Middle East witnessed before Trump was a 'no boots on the ground' USA. This left a vacuum which Russia filled. The Russians are here and Putin is boss. Netanyahu is visiting Moscow almost every month.
- In Beijing Islam is being taught, and Arabic – the changing of the guard!

5. Israel

- How can Israel conduct itself in this ever changing region? It is an awkward situation. Not the one now causing fear in the region – now Iran.
- Everyone is now in the politics of survival. Saudis are in fear of Iranian ambitions. Who is your enemy's enemy? In the 20th Century it was Israel but now no more. Muslim now slaughters Muslim. Fifteen million have been displaced.
- This is nothing to do with Israel/Palestine conflict. Turks and Kurds: the Kurds are supported by the USA which angers Erdogan. Historical anger is stirred up once more.

Professor Rabi then invites questions:

- *What is the way forward for Israel?* It is insoluble. It cannot be something we solve with something we can see with our eyes. Not only one conflict but an array of conflicts. The

West thought it had the answers. Those who understand history in the region will do best because 'there is order in the chaos'. Syria is now a place where Russia and Iran bolster their place in the Middle East. Western Europe is the only reasonable place for refugees to come – the only place where democracy is fully implemented. We need a world Marshall Plan. There is no formula to solve the problem.

- *Religion in this region is the bedrock. If leaders were to pray, would that be a solution?* There is something called the 'Knesset Plan' which wants to teach a 'respect for the otherness of others'. This is to be taught from kindergarten. At the moment it is 'we are right and you are wrong' so it has to be either you or me. This has to change. It has to be the next generation. Ours is lost. I accept the notion of prayer, but change can only be brought about by education. 'When religionists politicize religion we get hell.'
- *What about mothers as a force for education in 'the otherness of the others'?* This is important. But Jewish students don't know a word of Arabic. Not so vice-versa. But you cannot educate the other. Eretz Israel. Palestinians are losing. Twenty five years ago a viable State may have been possible, but not now. A Two State solution is now pie in the sky. Arabs no longer have time or energy to sort out the Palestinian problem.
- *Why are Russia and China involved in this region?* What is in it for Russia? If the West challenges Putin regarding Crimea, he'll give hell in the Middle East. And then refugees will appear on Europe's doorstep. Putin wants to restore Russia to its one time glory. They rescued Assad and he owes them.
- *Does Trump have a strategy in moving the capital to Jerusalem?* Trump is a symptom, not the problem. There is ongoing friction between nations: Spain, UK and Brexit, USA. Trump is the 21st Century. The notion of Israel has not been absorbed by Palestine. They still 'deny' Israel. But Israel has no other land. We need our State, otherwise it could happen again (presumably the Holocaust). Trump is a reflection of the 21st Century realities. Look at Germany. It's all changing. Right wing fascists on the one hand and Islamic faith on the other. What falls into the cracks? Neo-liberalism. It is very hard to tie up these loose ends. You can't universalize people.
- *Would a democratic Iran ever happen and would it alter your analysis?* Iran is cruel. There is no established opposition to usher into power.

Monday 22nd January

21. The West Bank – Visit to Settlements Mitzpe Danny and Ofrah (10am - 2pm)

This is the last day of the study part of our tour. Later we will drive to the Dead Sea, visit Masada and tomorrow fly home. Today we visit two Jewish Settlements in the Benjamin Region of the West Bank. The first is Mitzpe Danny, where we are greeted Miriam Ozorabaias. Miri is 30 years old and works for the Regional Council of Binyamin. Her role is to help foster understanding regarding the Settlements.

Settlement Mitzpe Danny

As we stand on a hilltop looking out over the surrounding hills of Samaria, Miri tells us a bit about the Settlement:

- Daniel Frei was a young Jewish man from London who made aliya to Israel in 1991. In 1995 he was murdered by a Palestinian whilst in his home in a nearby village. Danny was in his twenties and this Settlement was established in his memory.
- Miri explains that this is where the tribe of Benjamin lived. Being in the biblical heartland underlies her deep sense of connection to the land.
- ‘We lead normal lives here. Conflict always makes the news but generally we are in peace. This look-out shows how much space there is. 80% of the land is unoccupied. The issue is not lack of space, just a lack of acknowledgement of other’s right to live here.’
- I ask Miri if the situation regarding the land could be summed up something like this:

SETTLERS: This is our land, given to us by God, but we are happy to share it with you, the Arabs.

PALESTINIANS: This is our land, given to us by the UN, and we want you to leave.

Miri replies, ‘Yes, that’s pretty much it’. (But I wonder, if the land really was considered to be Israel’s in the eyes of the world, would they really be so accommodating?).

We board the bus and drive to the nearby Pasagot Winery where the Settlement produces wine from grapes grown locally. In their meeting room, overlooking the vast wine vats, the conversation continues. The six-million dollar question is asked: Whose land is it? This is Miri’s answer:

‘This is the ‘end game’ question! I am a third generation Israeli. I’ve travelled to many places but my sense of connection is here. This question can be asked of many places: Australia. Whose land is it? Aborigine? What about the USA? But here it was Jewish land thousands of years ago. We were in exile and couldn’t return for two thousand years. In 1948 the opportunity arose for us to re-establish our presence in the land. But others came and saw this land as theirs. Many don’t know the biblical history, neither Jewish nor Christian.

Miri goes on to talk about the Winery:

- ‘This is a venue for wine and conversation – a place for food and discussion, to hear the history and express views. People leave with more questions than answers.’
- Pasagot is a kosher winery, meaning it is grapes are grown and harvested according to religious laws and the workers live and work according to Jewish law (for example observing the Sabbath), though both Jews and Muslims work together in this winery.
- They export to the Jewish population, to America, Canada, Australia and Japan, and to Christians committed to Israel.
- They are affected by BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) and face problems when exporting wine to Europe. ‘Some won’t take products ‘Made in Israel’. They must be ‘Made in Palestine’. It is hard to compete with the European market.’

Settlement Ofra

We board the bus once more and drive to a much larger nearby settlement. Aaron Lipkin boards the bus, takes the microphone and introduces himself. Aaron is in his early fifties and tells us something of his life.

- ‘My father was an American born Jew from the USA. His parents were from Russia and Poland. The events in Israel of 1967 inspired him to make aliya. Here he met my mother who had Egyptian Jewish parents.
- So I was raised in Jerusalem in a family from East and West – Arab music and Mozart! I was a Conservative Jew but then became Orthodox when I was 19.
- I served in the army then met my wife at university. We were looking for a home, came to Ofra (then pop. 2000) and fell in love with it.
- Ofra is a community village – a different experience to living in the city, ‘the right way to live’.
- When Aaron was 16 his father had been in contact with Christians from Texas. Aaron had grown up with Christians as ‘the enemy’. His father began visiting the US and speaking in churches. Aaron would go with him and could meet Christians who love Israel and love the bible.
- ‘Although I came to Judea during my time in the army, I didn’t understand the roots here.’

We get off the bus and find ourselves on a hilltop. The roads are still here but the land is derelict with rubble and debris here and there. This is a Settlement that was deemed illegal and cleared by bulldozers. Aaron gathers us round and points to a village on another hilltop in the distance: ‘That Arab village over there is Bitin, the Arab name for Bethel. Abraham came to Bethel and built an altar there.’ He points to another hilltop, a few kilometres away, where we can see an air force radar. ‘That is the hill where, in Genesis, Abraham is given the command to ‘count the stars’. This is now what this radar installation does in that same place, it ‘looks at the stars’ – just as Abraham was commanded to do – as it protects our airspace.

Aaron tells us that Ofra was the first of the Settlements in the West Bank, a model of starting a modern Jewish village near an Arab one:

‘We’re not imperialists; we don’t want to remove the Arabs, only to establish a village nearby. In 1965 King Hussein of Jordan gave this land to the Arabs, but in 1967 the Israelis liberated this land. Up to 2003 we were heroes. Then, with the Oslo Accord, Ariel Sharon changes his mind and sees the Settlements as illegal as they are on land given to the Arabs. The Left Wing backed this, believing that Jews shouldn’t be in Judah and Samaria.’ We were heroes, but now we’re villains.’ More villages are to be destroyed in the coming months’.

We board the bus once more and drive into Ofra, a settlement of 3,000 people. We stop at the synagogue and are invited to sit in the main worship area. Here, Aaron talks to us some more and invites questions:

- *As an Orthodox Jew do you still hope to see the temple rebuilt in Jerusalem?* Yes. We pray for the rebuilding of the Temple. We’ve been dreaming of it for years. Temple Mount is the place for the Temple.
- *What is your view on a Two State solution?* Israel defines the land here as ‘undefined’, as in a war situation. Jordan occupied this land from 1948 to 1967. This was not recognised except by Pakistan and the UK. I don’t acknowledge Jordan’s right to this land. It belongs to God. Israel did not want Judea and Samaria to be separate. It was imposed on

them. The Two State solution is not a solution. I would advocate One State and Arabs with full rights. Everyone can benefit from this amazing land! Why is Rawabi empty? Because of the myth of Arab refugees. There are far fewer than is said.’

- *What do you make of Jesus?* Yeshua. Regular Jews see Jesus as the one who caused them to be slaughtered. I believe that God used Jesus and his Apostles to make know the bible throughout the world.

Unfortunately time runs out and it is time for us to leave. A fascinating visit, and the first time I have heard an Israeli express support for a One State solution. I have not quite understood why Settlements are allowed by Israel on the one hand and demolished by them on the other. [An article from the *Times of Israel* (March 2017) throws some light on this and can be found [here](#)].

22. Some final thoughts:

As the tour comes to an end, what do I make of all I have seen and heard? Before having had the privilege of coming on this tour and of being a part of these conversations, I had been pretty much tone deaf to the whole situation in Israel. I tried a decade ago to read around the conflict so as to gain a better understanding but, finding it so complex, I had all but closed my mind to the whole subject. Theologically, I would say was in the replacement camp, but more by default than considered opinion. It seemed to me to be manifestly unjust that God would forcibly evict others from ‘His’ land in order to give it to ‘His people’. So politically I was pro-Palestinian and could see little justification for Israel’s harsh treatment of them. And, anyway, haven’t all the Old Testament promises now been fulfilled in Christ? Are we to take them literally today?

This visit has enabled me to gain a far wider understanding of the reality. The passion with which those from both sides shared their perspective will stay with me for a long time. And the conversations recorded above contain many powerful quotes. As I said to my congregation the first Sunday I was back, ‘I am not pro-Palestinian and neither am I pro-Israeli. I am simply pro-people – people who are trying to find a way forward in a desperately difficult situation.’

I would say, however, that I have come away with a deeper appreciation of Israel’s perspective. I also now believe that the media narrative here in the UK is generally biased towards the Palestians. Yes, Palestinian grievances are many and justified but there is another side to the story and one that helps us to explain so much: the deep connection to the land felt by, not just the settlers, but all Jewish people here; their belief that God has promised them this land; the miracle of being able to return to it and the founding of their nation in 1948; the further miracle of the defeat of a considerably more powerful enemy in the 1967 Six-day-war; and the testimony to their suffering of Yad Vashem – arguably greater than any other nation on earth. All these need to be heard and understood. No wonder, for them, security is everything.

I like to think in pictures. I don’t know if the following works completely, but as a summary of the situation and for what it’s worth here goes. One day a scrawny lad returns to a neighbourhood in which his family used to live. This lad finds there another boy who is bigger than him and doesn’t like him being there – particularly when he starts to lay claim to the neighbourhood belonged to his ancestors and therefore to him. So this boy, who is bigger and stronger calls his brothers to help him get rid of the scrawny lad. But with extraordinary wit and determination (and some might say divine aid) this scrawny lad not only drives the brothers

away, but manages to wrestle the bigger boy to the ground and sit on his chest, pinning him down.

And there he stays, refusing to get off him ...

Over time the scrawny lad gets bigger and stronger. Although he is told that he should get off the other boy, he now has powerful friends who will back him. So he stays as he is. Meanwhile the boy, still pinned to the ground, gets weaker. His brothers, now too busy fighting amongst themselves, no longer seem that bothered about helping him. Every now and then he will throw a punch or spit at the (now not so) scrawny lad just to remind him that he is not happy about this situation. But still the now-not-so-scrawny lad refuses to budge.

And this is where we still are ...

The scrawny lad believes he has the right to live in the neighbourhood. He believes the (now not quite so) big lad is still intent on harming him. And he remembers what happened to him and his family when others made similar threats years before. So he refuses to move.

The thing is, it is now not the original scrawny lad sitting on the other lad; it is now his grand-child. And he sitting on the grand-child of the other boy ...

... and that's probably about as far as this analogy can take us!

And three months later

Monday 9th April 2018

23. Church House, London – Meeting with His Excellency Mark Regev, Israeli Ambassador (12.30-3pm).

As an opportunity to reflect further on our visit we gather once more in London to meet with Mark Regev. Mark has served as the Israeli Ambassador in London since 2015. Prior to that, from 2007, he was the Chief Spokesperson to the Prime Minister of Israel.

Mark tells us he would like to begin by addressing three items regarding Israel currently in the news:

- Firstly, the **violence in Gaza** that has taken place the past two Fridays and, he believes will, again, this Friday. 'We don't want it this way', he says. 'They can demonstrate all they want (except they can't against Hamas), but maintaining the security of our border fence is crucial. If they come into Israel then Israeli citizens are in danger'. He believes that demonstrating against Israel this way is pointless. 'Ariel Sharon pulled all Israelis out of Gaza in 2005 and there were no settlements left. He pulled back to the 1967 lines. So why are they demonstrating? The bottom line is that we can't allow terrorists to attack our citizens'.
- Secondly we turn to the problems in Jerusalem regarding the **Holy Sepulchre and the Israeli government's desire to tax the church**. He refers to an article published in the USA this morning written by the Orthodox Patriarch. In it he suggests that this move

‘threatens the survival of Christianity in Israel.’ Mark thinks this is a ridiculous claim to make and is at a loss to know why such inflammatory language is used. He argues that many churches include a commercial side (e.g. tourism and shops) and that this means it is not unreasonable that they should be taxed.

- Thirdly, we turn to **the rise of anti-Semitism** in the West (and not just in the UK Labour Party). ‘We thought it was over with the Holocaust’, he says, ‘but now, sadly there is a revival.’ He talks about a distinction between Zionists and Jews. He cites the General Secretary of the UN and the Pope, both having spoken out against a form of anti-Semitism that questions the right of the existence of the Jewish nation. ‘This is a new form of anti-Semitism. ‘Criticize Israel, by all means, but not our right to exist as a nation.’

Before moving on to questions Mark shares something he sees as ‘good news’, Israel’s greater engagement with surrounding Arab nations. ‘Israel is currently talking to more Arab countries than ever before.’ This is not due to a softening towards Israel as a people, but because of an increase in converging interests.

Rev Patrick Butler.