

Israel pilgrimage inspires life missions

Aug. 4 — Tel Aviv, 6 p.m.: After a delightful day we arrive in Tel Aviv. Tomorrow, early in the morning, we leave for a kibbutz in Galilee.

Today was great. We drove to Masada, the mountain-top fortress and villa built by Herod the Great close by the Dead Sea. His great fortress is on a mountain that stands alone and offered Herod two attractive features — extremely steep sides and a relatively flat 14-acre top.

Laborers took three years to build the complex, an incredible logistical and engineering feat. Herod himself spent not much more than three months there. Eventually, Masada fell into the hands of the Jews. A small number of them were able to hold off a Roman siege involving 9,000 troops and 3,000 slaves for over three years before being overcome. Even then, the Jews chose to end their own lives rather than to live in slavery. Only a few stayed alive to tell the story.

What people did in that era without our means of transportation, communications and construction is quite remarkable. It is hard to believe they managed it all until you see evidence that demonstrates that indeed they did.

We went from Masada to Ein Gedi, a spa on the shore of the Dead Sea. There we swam — more accurately, floated — in water with enormously high mineral content. After that, some of us enjoyed the mud treatment. You cover your body with mud from the sea and after a short time wash it off in nearby showers. The hoped for results? We were told a more youthful appearance and skin with a glow. None of us saw those results but we all had a circus there. It really was fun.

I appreciated the day because it was the first since our arrival during which we didn't receive a lot of verbal input. I have enjoyed all of the talks, but it was good to have a change of pace, and to have an opportunity to think about all we have heard.

The activities of the day also left us free to enjoy one another's company in a freer way. We laughed a lot. It was fun to experience water so heavy that you could float on your back without effort with your hands folded behind your head.

Lasting images of the day? Rabbi Alan Katz's gentle prayer for peace and freedom for all people ... two magnificent eagles soaring in the currents about Masada ... a temperature of 106 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade at the Dead Sea, and there was no shade! ... a relaxing meal at a harbor restaurant in Tel Aviv with Father Jim Lawlor, Sister Pat Schoelles, Isobel Goldman, Joan Pearson and Larry Fine ... the good spirit of friends delighting in the swim in the Dead Sea ... the laughter of the mud bath ... the awesome desert and the wonder of people subsisting in such an environment.

Aug. 5 — Rehovot, Tel Aviv: We miss Bill Johnson every day — all the more today on a visit to Rehovot, one of Rochester's sister cities. Dwight Cook, our mayor's pastor, greeted Mayor Sandler on Bill's behalf and Joe Posner presented a gift to Mr. Sandler. Jim Lawlor wore a Rochester T-shirt for the occasion; Al Katz and I forgot to wear our Red Wings hats this morning.

The discussion touched on themes dealt with by both cities — how best to welcome and incorporate new immigrants in the life of the community, how to combat the plague of drug abuse.

I am interested that in the 1950s, when people immigrated to Israel, their common ideal was the strengthening of the new and fragile state. To that end, they focused not on today, but yesterday. Powerfully symbolic of that intention was to take a new Hebrew name. More recently, the focus is more on economic improvement, the betterment of one's personal situation. This presents new challenges — how to honor the values, customs and traditions of the new immigrants and at the same time keep a reasonable focus on the common good.

Rehovot is home of the Weizmann Institute, one of the world's great research centers, and many high-tech facilities. Earlier this city flourished on its citrus industry. Now it is the site of the Hebrew University's Agricultural School.

Another stop: The Ayalon Institute, a cover name for a secret factory that produced bullets for the sub-machine gun used by Israeli freedom fighters. The operation took place underground, covered by agricultural activity, a bakery and a laundry.

A vegetarian lunch gathered two Russian men and an Ethiopian woman who have immigrated to Israel. This morning in the mayor's office we discussed in the abstract the problem of addressing immigrant concerns. Over lunch we heard from new citizens who are experiencing these problems on a day-to-day basis. For example, the woman works with young students and their families. The students enter a whole new world of studies in which parents can offer little support. To get needed assistance, the young people go to state-run boarding schools. Then at 18 years of age, they go into the army. The stress on family life is great — especially given the Ethiopian culture and the close-knit families to which they are accustomed.

On the way past Mount Tabor, Suzanne Schnittman reads from the Book of Judges about how Deborah led Israel to victory over their enemies. Then she reads the story of the Transfiguration from the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. At the moment we remember the people of Transfiguration Parish, Pittsford, who celebrate their

along the way

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feast day tomorrow. The story gives us a glimpse both of glory and of suffering.

"What good can come from Nazareth? What good can come from you?" Dwight Cooke asks us in a beautiful reflection on what Nazareth means in the Christian tradition. Nazareth speaks to me of trust, courage, faithfulness and generosity on the part of Mary and Joseph. It speaks to me of the compassion of God. It speaks to me in Dwight's words "of who we are and whose we are."

Next, the University of Rochester excavation at Yodfat — as fine and invigorating an experience as I have had in a long time. Yodfat was an ordinary mountain town in Galilee and the site of the first battle between the Roman legions and Israel. Flavius Josephus commanded the troops at Yodfat. The battle pitted a maximum of 4,000 Jews against a massive force of Roman legionnaires. After a siege of 47 days, the city fell.

I could write a lot about the visit, but let me mention the main reasons it was so enjoyable: 1) Because it was not settled again after this battle, Yodfat gives us the clearest idea we have of a Galilean village at the time of Jesus; remember that Nazareth is a 20-minute drive away. 2) It gives evidence that Galilee was very much in the mainstream of Jewish life at the time; from this we can conclude that Jesus did not appeal to people because they were out of touch with their tradition. 3) The site affords one of the most beautiful vistas I have ever seen. 4) Last, but not least, the students from the University of Rochester who have worked at Yodfat this summer were as warm and welcoming as they could be; it was a joy to be with them, especially to meet Gretchen Friedhaber from Chili and Andy McCooley from Brighton.

Aug. 6 — Mount of the Beatitudes, Galilee: I am standing in a quiet place, looking at this lake, remembering the Beatitudes and praying for our group and all the people at home. Rev. Dick Gilbert helped with his reflection on our reading of the Beatitudes from Matthew. He spoke of his own life, how God has led him and helped him to translate insight into action, prayer into service. Jesus taught truth, presented this profound moral framework. Then he showed us how to live it, how even to die for it. From up the hill in our moment of prayer we could hear the joyful song of another group; from below the quiet shared prayer of another. The Galilee is a mystic place. I wish that all who might ever read these words could one day come here.

I think of the young people of our diocese here, and I realize how much I'll miss being there when several hundred of them gather at Geneseo for our Youth Convention this weekend.

Feeding of the Multitudes: The people were hungry. Jesus fed them using the small offering of food that was available. He would rather have been resting after an intense day. But he fed them because they were hungry. Because he was Jesus. The overtones of Eucharist in this story are strong. We pause for a very simple Eucharist together. Father Dan Tormey presides. The Gospel is the post-resurrection story of Jesus and Peter at the lakeshore. In his homily, Dan speaks of his post-operation experience in Leuven, Belgium, last December. He work up in Intensive Care to find his hands restrained. "When I was young ... when you are old..."

The Primacy of Peter: Rev. Paul Womack speaks of prayer: "When you pray say this ... Our Father in heaven ..." And he speaks of perseverance and trust in prayer. "What mother or father, if their child asks for bread, would offer a stone or ... a fish ... a snake?" Paul invites us literally to exchange a stone for a piece of bread. We do so one by one. For me the moment sums up and expresses beautifully an important dimension of these days.

Capernaum: Site of the synagogue where Jesus taught. This is where he identified himself with the oppressed and burdened of the world in his comment on the Book of Isaiah. A powerful moment in his life. When the people first heard, they marvelled at his words. Later it was not so. To remember the moment now is to be challenged again to identify with the oppressed and downtrodden of our time and place. As for them, so it is for us. This is easier said than done, easier to begin than to sustain.

As I write I am bathed in perspiration, a reminder that we are 630 feet below sea level and that it is 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade here!

Golan Heights: Here, three miles from the Syrian border, we hear about the Syrian-Israeli clash of 1973. And perhaps we appreciate the more deeply the long-standing tensions of this region. There have been no serious incidents since '73. Pray God that in the short run that will continue; that

in the long run genuine peace will reign here.

Safed: Now we are 3,000 feet above sea level. It is cooler here than at Capernaum, but it is not cool. Safed is regarded — along with Jerusalem, Hebron and Tiberius — as one of Israel's sacred cities. Probably because it is one of the seats of Jewish mysticism. We stop to visit a local synagogue and to enjoy a walk through a district where artists and artisans sell their wares. Our bus carries more as we leave than it did when we arrived.

After a short run and brief swim in the Sea of Galilee, I joined the group for a delightful dinner cruise on Galilee. We were blessed to have the beauty of a full moon glistening on the water.

When we returned to the hotel, we gathered in a lounge to comment on our experiences of the past few days. I found it to be a constructive, even a necessary experience. It gave people a chance to say what they liked about our journey, what they felt could be improved, what questions it raised and which it had settled.

It is clear that endeavors such as this one — important and necessary as they are — are only another step along the way. Issues that divide or cause pain are of long-standing. They are complex and almost always tap into sensitive places. And even if the issues were much simpler, it would still take even the best-willed groups a long time to work everything out.

I am happy to be a part of this experience and am confident it will serve to advance the cause of interfaith relations on our community.

Aug. 7: In Gethsemane this afternoon, Pat Schoelles, Joan Sobala and Suzanne Schnittman led us in prayer around Mark's account of Jesus' passion, especially the Agony in the Garden. After the reading, we went apart for some moments in quiet prayer and then gathered in a circle around an olive tree for a closing prayer.

I loved the moment, which brought together much that has happened these days. As the moment in the garden captures in intense fashion much of what Jesus had experienced in his public ministry ("... and the devil left him for another time ..."), so it is a pivotal moment in his self-gift for our redemption ("... not my will ... but yours be done.")

In the garden and as I write now in my hotel room, I have images of the day now concluding: the remains and beginning restoration of a fishing boat used on the Sea of Galilee in Jesus' time ... prayer and blessings at the banks of the Jordan ... the majesty of the Judean wilderness ... a walk through the neighborhood of the Me'a She'arim, ultraorthodox Jews who think the State of Israel should not exist ... people gathering for yet another Shabbat at the Western Wall.

I loved every minute of this trip and now find myself trying to organize my thoughts about how all of us can share the experience with people at home, how we can build on the experience in our communities of faith and with all of our sisters and brothers.

Now to dinner on the hotel terrace and a program on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation in Israel, led by a Roman Catholic, a Jew and a Muslim, who are all recognized leaders in this field.

Aug. 9 — El Al Flight 001: The airport is alive with young people — including the U of R group — who are returning home after summer experiences in Israel. Word has it that this will be a lively, musical crossing.

Aboard the plane, still thinking about a meeting we had at the hotel just before a farewell meal at a neighboring Moroccan restaurant. The meeting was oriented to how best we can share our experience with people at home. And more, what can we do to combat discrimination, violence and abuse of human dignity wherever it exists in our community.

I am sure that such commitment exists in all of us. And, as I heard things this afternoon, the experience of these days leaves us all with a thirst to deepen our efforts. Does that mean to promote new initiatives? Or encourage more people to participate in existing ones? What structural changes might we promote? What attitudinal changes ought we to encourage?

Any single answer to those questions eludes me. But I am confident that with God's guidance this trip will bear good fruit not only for members of our group but also for interfaith relationships and for our community in general. It will certainly require patience and self-sacrifice, but it will happen.

I spent our last morning here with Alan Katz and Sue Nowak at the Shabbat service held at the school where Alan studied for the rabbinate. He very kindly guided me through the order of the service, which I found to be beautifully peaceful and inspiring. I appreciated Alan's kindness and hospitality. The chance to pray with him and a community so close to his heart provided a memorable conclusion to a trip I shall remember for a long time.

Enough for now. I thank you for reading these reflections. They but touch the surface of what has happened since we left Rochester on July 30. But I hope they give you at least some sense of what we were about and why this privileged opportunity has meant so much to me and, I think, to all on this journey.

Shalom.
Peace to all.