



# Interfaith mission explores Holy Land



A woman lights a candle in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Old City, Jerusalem, July 31. The Interfaith Leadership Mission visited the church during their first day in Israel.

Most of the group is reluctant to leave for the hotel; they talk of returning.

Back at the hotel for Shabbat dinner, Rabbi Katz teaches us a "Bim Bom Shabat Shalom" song and leads prayer. Noting we had "hit the high spots" rather quickly, he asks the group to talk about what it experienced.

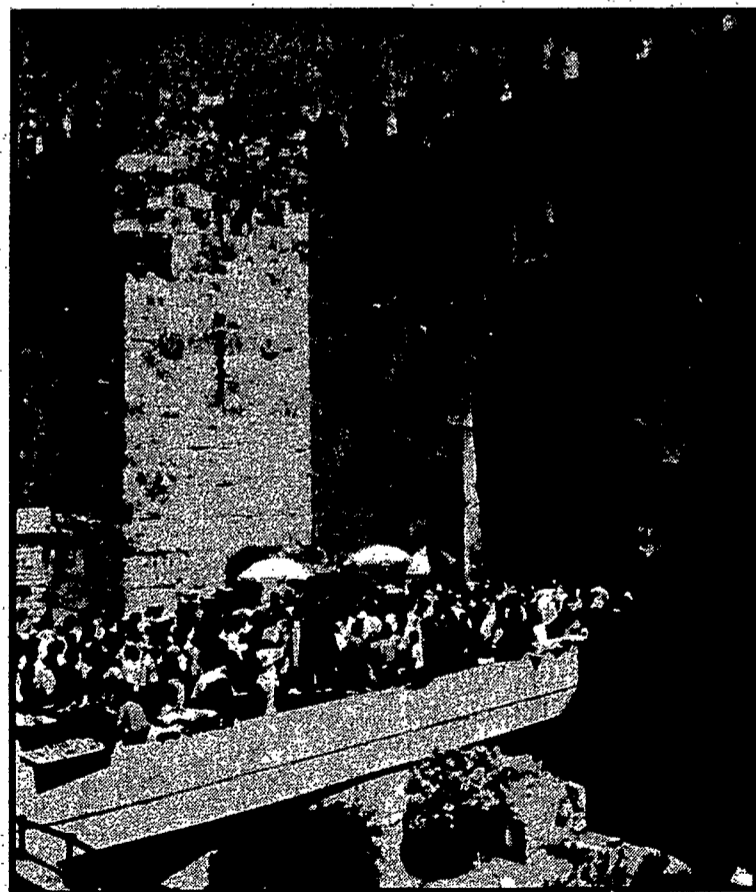
"Especially when we were inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and I watched a few of you just meditating, praying, to me that was very very touching," the rabbi says.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark says that "to come here today was to remember all kinds of holy people, not just holy people we honor in our traditions, but holy people we meet every day." He has found being here just six hours very moving.

As the comments progress, so do the emotions.

"I feel I am a lucky person to be here," says Suzanne Schnittman, a Catholic who came with her Jewish husband, Michael. "I feel I truly belong to both faiths."

Sister Schoelles reflects that it wasn't the sites or stones that affected her so much, but seeing people living their faith at each place. She could have come to Jerusalem at other times but is happy she did not until now, with this interfaith group. "You can't go back the same after this," she says.



Crowds flock through the Damascus Gate, which opens into the Old City.

The following is from a diary kept by Staff Writer Kathleen Schwarz during the Interfaith Leadership Mission to Israel led by Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Rabbi Alan Katz July 30-Aug. 9, with 21 other spiritual leaders and pilgrims from the Rochester area. Participants will discuss interfaith relations in the Aug. 13 issue of the Courier.

**JULY 31. DAY 1:** We arrive for the hottest summer in Israel in 35 years, Rabbi Alan Katz informs us as we

board the bus to go up from Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Menachem Hafetz, our tour guide, says it is 102 degrees Fahrenheit.

We drop off our suitcases at the Laromme Hotel. Next thing we know, we are walking the stone streets of the Via Dolorosa — Way of the Sorrows, the path along which Jesus carried his cross to his own crucifixion — through the Old City and its narrow streets filled with tourists, and mostly Muslims and Jews.

"All of a sudden, I was standing where Jesus Christ died," Sister Pat Schoelles remembers thinking.

We had reached the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is what Jews on the trip will remember and talk about for days later: seeing their Christians companions line up to kneel at the altar in the ornate Greek Orthodox chapel in the church.

"Kneeling beneath the altar to touch the stone where the cross was said to stand," Sister Schoelles said, "I felt I was touching 100 million other people."

Minutes later we reach the Wailing Wall section of the Western Wall — this is what Christians will talk about for days. We have three minutes to take pictures, we're told that evening, because pictures are forbidden after the Sabbath observance begins.

We walk down the stone slope past observers, past women in long skirts and men in various Orthodox black dress. It is hot, and they are wearing long black coats and trousers,

and some, fur-border hats, depending on their ancestral homelands. On the right at the Wall, men are praying and singing loudly. The women, on the right side, are more quiet. Women in business suits "daven," swaying as they recite prayers. The women I am with approach the Wall separately, reverentially.

"It does a lot to me to be here," Isobel Goldman, community relations director for the Jewish Community Federation of Greater Rochester says, keeping her words short to savor the moment.

**AUG. 1. DAY 2:**

Some members of the group attend a Conservative Jewish service in the city, some attend a Reform service, and others tour the Tower of David Museum. It is a day to hear from Israeli Jews and Christians, to begin to see the complexity of living in Israel. At the hotel the group has lunch with Rabbi Levi Lauer of the Shalom Hartman Institute, which does research, programming for high schools and community seminars on Jewish matters. He is ordained Reform, but is a strict observer of the Sabbath and asks that his picture not be taken, for that reason.

"Israel is the single most physically dangerous place for any Jew in the world to live," he states, explaining that Israel cannot rest surrounded by the neighbors it has. His passion, his dedication to both the army and Jewish tradition — the fact he blesses his children every Sabbath, phoning his daughter wherever she may be, impresses the Rochester group, in this first scheduled meeting with an Israeli Jew.

The complex situation in Israel is beginning to emerge listening to this rabbi committed to Zionism: the challenge of what to do now that Jews have the authority to live permanently in one place, the need to respect a culture of diversity, the way to bring together millions of Jews to whom Israel is like a foster mother — they may have better lives now but they remember the lands they came from. And most no longer believe in a God who can manipulate human history, Rabbi Lauer says.

A second session is with Christian Arabs, Hanna Siniora, publisher of the *Jerusalem Times* and chairman of the Palestinian American Chamber of Commerce, and Rizek Abusharr, director of the Jerusalem International YMCA — a Presbyterian, Palestinian Arab.

"This society is dwindling rapidly, and is a grave cause for concern," Abusharr says. Not only do Christian Arabs seek better opportunities elsewhere; but they are constantly called upon to establish their innocence. He questions whether there is or can be such a thing as a pluralistic society, noting that a future Palestinian state will be largely Muslim and Israel, of course, will remain Jewish. Of 6 million people in Israel, 1 million are Arabs. Of 1 million Arabs, 170,000 are Christian — a mi-

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