

# THE JEW ON A SHORT-TERM VISIT TO ISRAEL: THE "MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR"

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**E**nsuring Jewish continuity through the transmission of a strong sense of Jewish identification ranks high on the communal agenda. Visiting Israel, whether for a long duration for study or for a short trip as a tourist, has been shown to be a very effective way of strengthening that sense of identification. This article focuses on the Jewish visitor embarking on a "magical mystery tour" of Israel.

Furnham and Bochner (1982), in their "Psychology of the Short-Term Visit," have classified it into five categories: the exploitative, pleasure first, high contact, environmental, and spiritual. The *exploitative* visit (e.g., a business trip) is outside the scope of this article. In contrast, the *pleasure first* visit is certainly relevant; on this visit go the holiday makers who take photographs, travel to famous places, and buy souvenirs, but are essentially socially alienated from local society. The *high contact* visit is taken by journalists, students, and mission participants. *Environmental* visits are encouraged by the geographic terrain of Israel, particularly the sharp contrasts between the north and the south of the country, the appeal of the snow-capped Mt. Hermon, the flowering fields in the spring, and the harsh but welcoming desert. All would agree that the *spiritual* motivation to visit Israel is strong, attracting those not seeking sensual pleasures but rather the meaning of life.

Although this model is extremely useful, it does not cover all the purposes for which the Jewish visitor might plan a trip to Israel. The State of Israel has given the modern Jew, and specifically the Jewish visitor, a source of pride and another dimension of identity. This article describes the levels and manner in which Israel can indeed be perceived and examines some implications of visits to Israel.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

An extensive literature exists on the factors that motivate Jews to visit Israel. Steven Cohen (1986) suggests that travel to Israel is dependent on these variables: family income and the individual's level of education and denominational attachment. In addition, the likelihood of travel increases if there are close friends or family in Israel, and the individual identifies with Zionism.

Similarly, Hochstein (1986) suggests that positive factors encouraging visits to Israel are participation in Jewish education and religious affiliation (Orthodox Jews are by far the most interested in visiting Israel), whereas a weak Zionist identification keeps people away.

## WAYS OF PERCEIVING ISRAEL

### The Land of the Bible

For many Diaspora Jews, one of the initial contacts with Israel is through Jewish education received as a child. Key words—Jerusalem, Temple, Sinai—are used at a young age. The power of biblical stories, taught by the inspired teacher, is likely to remain evocative well into adulthood.

Analysis of Jewish texts has always been central in Jewish learning, and Deborah Lipstadt in her fascinating article, "Adult Jewish Learning: Policy Implications," notes that "text study also provides the learner with a sense of authentic and primary connection with Judaism" (Lipstadt, 1989, p. 134). Thus, the visit to biblical Israel bonds the Jewish visitor as a result of earlier studies.

This sensitivity of the Jewish visitor can be used effectively by a *tour educator*, who is not merely a guide who imparts bland facts but rather engages in an interactive educational approach with the visitor. The

tour educator can constantly draw on sources that are familiar to the visitor because they were a legitimate part of the Jewish experience *before* the visit to Israel. Biblical sites are appealing because of their familiarity. The "text" is therefore both written and scenic. A visit to Israel has clear elements of connecting modern-day Jews to their biblical ancestors and lends a sense of comfort from the known.

Ari Bouganim (1988, p. 10) notes that "tourism to Israel is often spiritually oriented." Furthermore, he adds,

The holiness of the land stems from its having been promised to our forefathers and to their children who came out of Egypt and were redeemed from exile....In other words, the Jewish tie to the land is essentially messianic in nature, i.e., it is a tie which connects the history of the land and the nation with the destiny of the land and the Jewish people (Bouganim, 1988, p. 11).

Yet, it is unwise to see a biblical visit to Israel in simplistic terms. Of central importance is determining which aspects of the Bible are to be emphasized in the tour. The educator must relate to the Bible as a complex document. "Bible stories" that are chosen and presented to show Jewish history in an excessively positive light are problematic not only in terms of historical accuracy but also in terms of the visit to the real Land of Israel. The biblical period was filled with tension and conflict, and its honest balanced portrayal permits the informed visitor to see modern Israel as a *CONTINUITY*, and not as a digression, from the earlier period.

The land of the Bible was a real land with real people. The Bible tells the story of vision and hopes, the central presence of the Almighty, and also the foibles of human beings. Thus, the visitor should learn that in Israel one can also study war and warfare together with mundane aspects of life in cities and villages (Wigoder et al., 1991).

Jerusalem, in particular, lends itself to widespread interpretation. This remarkable

city is described in the Bible in some 51 different ways, including City of David, City of Joy, City of Righteousness, Holy City, and Joyous City. At the same time it is also described as the Oppressing City, Perpetual Desolations, and Tumultuous City (Wigoder et al., 1991).

The adult visitor, however, is surely able to deal with a complex range of impressions. Jewish educator Betsy Katz (1990, p. 5), notes that "we are living in a new age of adult learning based on the perception that adulthood is no longer a product of the years of childhood and adolescence. Rather, it is a process, an extension of the continuous growth and development characteristic of our early years."

### The Wasteland

In a graphic description of the last days of the Second Temple period, the historian Josephus writes of the ghastly destruction of Jerusalem. He laments, "If only we had died before seeing the Sacred City utterly destroyed by enemy hands, the Holy Sanctuary so impiously uprooted" (Josephus, 1969, p. 365).

The Roman period summons up images of mass destruction. In the following centuries one reads of a chain of conquerors entering the Holy Land, fighting and destroying it, uprooting what existed, and then being replaced by yet another ravager. In the more recent Turkish invasion, the impression is of the constant felling of trees for railway construction.

One of the central goals of Zionism was turning the land into a green zone. David Ben-Gurion frequently spoke of making the desert bloom. The pre-1967 War areas of Israel are referred to as "within the Green Lines," and Diaspora Jews' contributions to the Jewish National Fund Blue boxes have given them a sense of participation in transforming Israel from a "wasteland" to a tree-filled country. Any tour to Israel should certainly include the kibbutzim of the Negev Desert—a new band of pioneers battling with severe climatic conditions.

The city of Beersheva deserves recognition; one cannot but be amazed to see this southern city appearing out of the sand. In addition, Eilat has certainly become a "Sun Mecca" for people from northern Europe.

Perceiving Israel as an arena of agricultural and environmental change not only enables the visitor to see aspects of the real Israel but also supports a wider universalistic conception of Israel. If the modern State of Israel is thus "normalized," is presented like any other country of the world, then it is, in a sense, easier to visit. This type of tour does not demand much historical knowledge nor does it require particular sensitivities.

Israel is indeed a scenically appealing country. In a short drive one can see the sea, highlands, and desert. The view is pleasing, and the modern visitor can enjoy the realization that the former wasteland is no longer barren, that the country blooms, and that flowers and trees do indeed abound. The planting of trees has taken on almost spiritual elements and has also been the basis of comedy as seen in the movie, "Sallah Shabbati," in which new immigrants from North Africa were required to imbibe Zionism via tree planting.

However, if this approach does not give adequate credit to the work of Israelis in transforming the harsh terrain, then the picture is incomplete. The tour educator must inform visitors just how carefully planned human endeavors "magically" transformed the land.

#### A Land of Refugees

The overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews came to this country as refugees. Regardless of the legalistic use of this word, the decision to live in Israel for most was due to the "push" factor, rather than the "pull" element (Hermani, 1977). The "push" may have been anti-Semitism, economic crisis, or warfare. How does this factor influence the short-term visitor? If Israelis are to be perceived as refugees, then they certainly need help. Thus, one might surmise, the visitor should come as a philan-

thropist, donating old clothes and with plentiful alms for the poor.

This image of a refugee nation may be of benefit to fund raisers, but is not necessarily so for tourists. I recall the sense of deception felt by a South African family who had contributed to their Israeli cousins' welfare over a long period of time, often even to the point of depriving themselves of needed goods. On their first visit to Israel, they were aghast to find their "poor" relatives living comfortably in a comfortable Jerusalem suburb. The image of the "poor Israeli" has validity. However, to unnecessarily perpetuate this image is to the disadvantage of all. Most Israelis are no longer "refugees," have settled down well, and live reasonably comfortable lives. If assistance is to be given, it should be provided to the new immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

#### Israel at War

The history of Eretz Israel (Palestine) and the modern State of Israel in the 20th century can certainly be viewed through the spectacles of a "war-torn" State. Israel is undisputably located in a harsh conflict zone, and from the 1920s the level of violence has indeed been high. However, emphasizing this aspect excessively has pitfalls. In reality, there have been long periods of relative peace, and not every day in Israel is a "war-day."

Seeing Israel through its wars does have certain attractions. To travel the country looking at war sites and Israeli Army encampments perhaps alleviates the sense of vulnerability of certain Diaspora Jews. Reliving the dramatic moments of the Six-Day War gives some a sense of security that, if they feel in any way threatened in the future, Israel will be available to assist them. The sense of vulnerability during the Holocaust remains traumatic in the consciousness of Jews (Young, 1991). The question then is: to what extent should the short-term visitor be exposed to the military aspects of Israel? The impact of war on *Israeli society* is important for any visitor to

see. The issue however, is to what extent war sites should be central on the itinerary.

I would make a plea for judicious use of these sites. It is the regular life of the citizen-soldier that is of even more importance than the war sites. The tour educator who takes his or her group through the never-ending list of battles, who feels that a staged army maneuver is the peak of a visit, and who sees the generals as the most important role model for the future is doing a major disservice to us all.

### CONCLUSION

The Israeli experience must surely be more than just a tour. It has to include both cognitive and affective elements. It should encourage the highest level of participatory learning and also be flexible in design. The term "learning Kehillah" (learning community) should be used to refer to a group on tour, indicating that the participants are not only gaining information about Israel but are also experiencing a meaningful dialogue with other participants (Liptz & Spectre, 1990).

The themes and topics should be carefully organized into a "conceptual map," so there is an easy flow from topic to topic. The choice of sites should be based on a well-developed set of educational concepts, realizing that each site may have historical, spiritual, scenic, or just "plain fun" roles. The ideal tour should deal with both the immediate and long-term needs of the visitor, ensuring that the material presented will encourage the participants to consider unexplored realms. Each visit to Israel should whet the appetite for yet another.

No country is typified only by its museums, scenery, or battlefields, but needs to be seen as a whole, a combination of vibrant elements, a juxtaposition of past and present. This is especially true of Israel, for which exists an extra danger—a tendency to stress or glamorize a certain element to the exclusion of others. Glamorizing is understandable for it is sometimes easier to escape into bible stories or to use military reasoning to justify certain aspects of a

society's behavior, rather than admitting to a less pleasant reality. However, the average Israeli, both the citizen-soldier and his mother, wife, or sister, is striving for normalization. It would be a service to tourist and Israeli alike to maintain this perspective.

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