

Israel, 2008



Day One – Tuesday (Caesarea, Mt. Carmel, Megiddo, Nazareth, Yardenit, Galilee)

Touching down in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Tuesday morning was quite a thrill. We'd been flying for hours – overnight, according to the clock in the Middle East – but only until 11 pm according to our poor, jet-lagged bodies still on Central Standard Time.

We had been told that our first landing upon Israel's soil would be a spiritual experience, and indeed it was. How I wish I could have lingered and drunk in more of the experience but, alas, I had to drag my sinus-stuffy achy-headed self through Ben Gurion airport to gather suitcases and assemble with the group.

We met our tour leader, Richard Page, of Ed Hill Tours. I believe I mumbled my introduction this way: "I 'm Linda....don't want to shake your hand...have a cold...using hand sanitizer....pleased to meet you..." And thus began our official tour.

They wasted no time in starting the tour. Within minutes, we were through customs and onto the bus, thankfully only about half full. We left the city, heading along the coast to Caesarea, the port city built by Herod the Great and inhabited at one point by Pontius Pilate. Israel is quite small, and towns can be accessed within half-hours. Nothing is very far away from anything else.

Out of the bus we trudged, craning to see the spectacle that is ancient Caesarea. I fumbled to assemble my new camera, a Canon Rebel bought specifically for this trip, and tried to remember Boyd's diligent instructions for operating the F-stop, shutter time, and film speed for each exposure. However, due to the last day and a half of travel, my head cold, and mild Vick's Day Care intoxication, my first ten photos or so were garishly-white over-exposed failures. Eventually, I figured it out and, thanks to the natural splendor of the sky and surroundings, was able to capture some of the beauty in these ruins.



It's amazing to stand in a place as old as this. Nothing in America has lasted so long. The view of the ruins reaching into the Mediterranean Sea, the crumbled remains of palaces and amphitheaters, the surprisingly durable aqueduct built along the coast in ancient times all took our breath away. It was a cold day, and we tightened our collars against the wind.



We then headed northeast towards the Plain of Esdraelon and Mount Carmel. As we approached the region, Shlomo, our Israeli guide, pointed out the various mountains visible. Mount Carmel was a long ridge with two peaks at one end of the valley. We ascended the higher peak, said to be the place where Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal as recorded in the book of Kings. At the top, a church was built to commemorate the prophet Elijah. We were allowed to climb to the roof where we gained a grand, panoramic view of the entire valley laid out below.



From end to end, our guide pointed out the mountains and spots of biblical significance: Mt. Tabor (tales of Deborah and Barak) and Mt. Gilboa (the death of Saul and his sons), the river Kishon (exploits of Gideon and the Midianites), and the Valley of Megiddo (also known as the Valley of Armageddon, which figures strongly in apocalyptic prophecy). An icy wind chilled us as we stood atop that mountain, looking over the biblical land of Zebulun and Issachar, and able to see all the way back to Caesarea many miles to the south.

Down the mountain, we headed to nearby Megiddo for lunch. After eating we ascended the hill (*Tel Megiddo*) containing 23 layers of civilization built one upon the other – different communities that sought to establish a stronghold on this mountain at the end of the valley (*Har’Megiddo*). The mountain is a gateway to the valley – nothing can enter unseen, hence its importance as a city. We walked past walls and structures built in Solomon’s time, past stables and cisterns. Another grand view of the valley lay before us! We then descended several hundred steps into the hand-hewn tunnel that led under the city walls to the outside of the mountain city. The early inhabitants of Megiddo had carved this tunnel to gain access to the spring outside the walls so that their water supply would not be interrupted during a siege. The outside access to the spring was sealed so an enemy would not recognize the secret tunnel. Deep, deep into the ground we went, marveling at such an engineering feat from the 9th century BC, and emerged outside the walls.



Continuing northward a short distance, we came to the city of Nazareth, now a large city sprawled across the hillside, visible from quite far away. We didn’t stop in the city itself (not every place in Israel is ideal for tourism!), but instead drove outside the city to what has been identified as the “brow of the hill.” This was the place from which an angry mob attempted to throw Jesus, but the Bible says “He passed through the midst of them.” We stood at the edge of the very steep precipice, intimidated by the sheer drop and rocky terrain below.

With our minds swimming from so many historical adventures in such a short time, we were happy to finally get to our next stop – Yardenit, a baptismal site on the Jordan River (*Ha Yarden*). The tree-lined shaded walk along the Jordan River was peaceful, yet touristy. A pool-like area was created for groups to supposedly re-baptize en masse. We were not tempted to *lay again the foundations...of baptism* of which the book of Hebrews speaks, but we did enjoy the scenery and the rest. One of our group, an Episcopalian priest, was overcome with the desire to be baptized in the Jordan River, and enlisted a Pentecostal preacher to take him down in the water. He came up singing a doxology at the top of his lungs!

We left, following the winding shoreline of the Sea of Galilee to the town of Tiberius, and checked in at the Sheraton Moriah Tiberius. Our room’s balcony opened to a spectacular view of the sea and we watched the sky slowly darken over the Galilee region. Evening time – and our first chance to change clothes and freshen up from our flight overseas!

We showered and changed, and met for dinner at the hotel next door – The Golden Tulip – for a typical Israeli buffet. Lots of meats, vegetables, salads, breads, and desserts – but no dairy, for the majority of Israel is under kosher law. Coffee (and milk) was served in a separate room after dinner.

Day Two – Wednesday (Mt. of Beatitudes, “Jesus” Boat, boat ride, Capernaum, Kibbutz En Gev, Golan Heights, Tabgha, Mensa Christi)

Waking up to see the sun rise over the Sea of Galilee was an exhilarating experience! There is such a natural beauty in this pristine sea and the soft gray mountains that ring its shore. After an elaborate breakfast, we climbed aboard the bus to travel to the north shore of Galilee and the traditional site of the Mount of Beatitudes. Understandably, no one knows the *exact* location of so many sites in Israel, but standing here on the northern shore of the sea, and viewing the surrounding countryside, you are left with the indelible image of this area in which Jesus ministered. Which field? Which hilltop? It really doesn't matter. It's so easy to see Him carry on His ministry here, and there, and perhaps all over.

There is a pretty octagonal church atop this mountain, each window providing Kodak-moments of the seaside. We strolled down the path and listened as Diane read the words of Jesus from His sermon on the mount. Further along, we stopped at an outdoor gazebo and sang an early-morning *Amazing Grace* to the Lord.



We then drove to a nearby *kibbutz*, an Israeli communal town, to view the “Jesus” Boat. The museum here housed the remains of a preserved first-century boat that was discovered when the level of the Sea of Galilee dropped one year due to drought. There is no evidence the boat was used by Jesus or His disciples, but it being from that time period made it interesting to view.

We had our own boat waiting at the dock for us – the *Chorazin*. “A poorly named boat,” David noted, for Jesus rebuked Chorazin in His day, suggesting that this city would go down to Hades. We, however, made it across the sea uneventfully. The captain of the boat played a garbled rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*, whose “bombs bursting in air” coming through the cheap PA system on board made us jump and laugh. Thankfully, he switched it off halfway through the song and replaced it with worship music. The Canadians in our group were glad, too!



Partway across the water, we stopped to survey the hills circling the lake and reflect upon Jesus' ministry in the Galilee.

We landed near the remains of Capernaum, a town where Jesus did much of His ministry. The major archaeological find in this town is the ruins of a house said to be that of Simon Peter. Capernaum from Jesus' time is a grid of blackened stones laid out in a series of rooms and buildings – discernable and distinct. Nearby was the white Byzantine-era synagogue, impressive with its massive columns and flourishes.



We traveled partway around the sea to *Kibbutz En Gev* and enjoyed a "St. Peter's Lunch" of fish and bread.

After lunch, we climbed up high into the Golan Heights, a lush mountainous region east of Lake Tiberius. We



stopped for a short presentation on the settlement of the Golan area and of the Yom Kippur War that was fought over the area, and viewed an interesting topographical interactive map of the region. The details were delivered fluidly and passionately by Shlomo, our Israeli guide, but I'm sure others may have differing viewpoints about the Golan Heights. I, however, enjoyed the narration and plan to spend more time understanding the history of conflict over here.

In the afternoon, we stopped at two more spots claiming historical significance. Tabgha has a church built where Jesus fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes. A series of intricate mosaics adorn the inside of the church. Down the road, *Mensa Christi* was built over the rock said to be the breakfast table of Jesus and Peter on the shore of Galilee. Outside this church, we wandered down to the seashore, picking through rocks and shells and listening to the water lap against the shore. The late afternoon sun cast our long shadows across the beach and bathed us in a crisp, orange light. It was the end of a perfect day in the Galilee.



Day Three – Thursday (Beth She'an, Qumran, Masada, Dead Sea)

We left early to head southward, leaving the Sea of Galilee behind and following the Jordan River as it made its way down to the Dead Sea. Across the Jordan Valley, the mountains of Jordan rose and mirrored the mountains of Israel on our right. We saw various checkpoints along this once-tense border, and passed spots where high, barbed-wired and electrified fences separated Israeli territory from Palestinian.

Our first stop was Beth Shean, whose town contained the excavated ruins of one of the oldest civilizations in Israel. The structures uncovered dated from before the time of King Saul, through Byzantine times (when it was known as the city of Scythopolis, its Hellenistic name) and beyond. The grisly biblical reference to this town was in the fact that King Saul's dead and decapitated body was brought here and put on display after he and his sons were killed in battle. The wind was blowing icy-cold, though the day was sunny. My cold had developed into a pretty harsh cough, so I lingered in the gift shop while the group rummaged through the ruins.

The next portion of drive brought us deeper into the mountainous terrain of Israel: the Judean desert and the wilderness through which Jesus wandered for forty days. The landscape folded into beautiful gray mountains, dotted sporadically with groves of desert palms.



We arrived at Qumran, and toured the remains of a first-century Essene settlement. Some suppose that John the Baptist may have come from such a settlement as this, and that Jesus' baptism took place down here, far south of the Sea of Galilee. We marveled at the harsh landscape, calling to mind the wilderness that Jesus walked through during His temptation. In 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the caves here at Qumran by a Bedouin shepherd boy.



Traveling further south, we followed the Dead Sea to Masada, the hilltop fortress built by Herod the Great and used by the Jews in their final revolt against the Romans. It was here that the Jews came and withstood the Roman armies for three years until their final suicide pact atop the mountain – they chose suicide over enslavement to the Romans. We rode a cable car to the top of the mountain, and then explored the remnants of Herod's magnificent palace at the top. We had an amazing view that stretched for miles across the desert floor, the Dead Sea, and over the mountains that led back up toward Jerusalem. It was a well-defended fort; we could still see the outlines of the Roman camps at the base of the mountain.

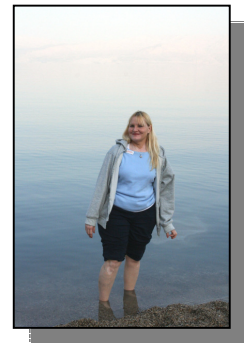


Down the mountain, we stopped at an ethereal edge of the Dead Sea, where the air was still and quiet, the water slowly gushed over the crusted minerals and salt at the shoreline, and the mountains at the far end of the sea melted into a mist that caused the sky and water to blend as one. We lost the line of the horizon as we dipped our toes into the salty water.

A few of our group changed into suits and went into the water, floating on their backs, which is the only thing possible to do in the Dead Sea. You can't swim, and you absolutely can't sink. Some people rubbed their bodies with the



thick, black mud around the shore – supposedly one of nature's finest spa moments. The air was incredibly dry – sauna-like in atmosphere even though it was cool outside. I felt my lungs and sinuses clear quite a bit. It was mid-afternoon, and I could feel the pressure of being so far below sea level. (Much further below than New Orleans!)



Back on the bus, we journeyed north again, to the point where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. We then turned and headed *up to Jerusalem*. From all points in Israel, Jerusalem is always *up!*

We could see Jericho on the plains to our right, though we did not go to the city.

Within an hour, we saw the scattered suburbs of Jerusalem beginning to accumulate on the hillsides. Our bus climbed up to enter the city by way of Mount Scopus. It was nighttime, and we got our first glimpse of the city sprawled out before us, full of light and splendor - truly a moving moment! Our drive into the city took us right past the old city walls, past the King David Hotel (a landmark!), and around the corner to the Dan Panorama Hotel. We got a lovely reception upstairs, and were treated to a balcony view of the Jaffa Gate and Old Jerusalem just a short walk away. Tomorrow morning, we would be in that Holy City!

Day Four – Friday (Jerusalem, Mount of Olives, Via Dolorosa, Western Wall, Garden Tomb)

We headed to the top of the Mount of Olives for our first daytime (breathtaking!) view of Jerusalem. The scattered cloudiness made it a bit cool, and kept most of those early morning pictures a little grayish. Nevertheless, the city was beautiful. Its staunch, crenellated walls of white, Jerusalem stone encircled the Old City, which in turn clung to the edges of the majestic temple mount. We had a sweeping view of the city and all her parts laid out upon the hills - Mount Moriah, Mount Zion, the City of David, the Kidron Valley.



There was a tourist-camel resting at our bus stop – decked out in brightly colored blankets and accessories – whose owner was charging \$5 per ride. Of course, David and I had to take a ride. After all, you can't come all the way to the Middle East and *not* ride camels, can you?

We descended the Mount of Olives in stages, stopping here and there in locations of note: *Dominus Flevit*, the chapel called “The Lord Wept,” whose teardrop-shaped dome covers a tiny sanctuary commemorating the time Jesus wept over Jerusalem; the Garden of Gethsemane, a fenced-in courtyard housing centuries-old gnarled olives trees; and The Church of All Nations, built over the site where Jesus prayed in agony in the garden.



The hillside was lined with cemeteries – Jewish and Arab. From our viewpoint, we could see the Eastern Gate to the Temple Mount (also known as the Golden Gate), which had been bricked in by the Muslims many centuries ago. The view of Jerusalem was outstanding.



We entered the Old City through the Dung Gate, past an Arab bread vendor whose baked oval rings were piled high atop his wagon, and came into an area just outside the Temple Mount excavation area. All around us were scattered stones and broken heaps. It was Friday, mid-morning, and people hustled about in the city. The distinctive *hasadim* in their long black coats, top hats, and side curls hurried through the gates, sometimes in groups of four or five.



“Why are they in such a hurry?” I asked Shlomo, our guide.

“It’s the Sabbath. They’re trying to get home in time for *Shabat*” he replied.

It was a very odd moment. We stood in the midst of these ruins and watched the orthodox Jews scurry about to prepare for their Sabbath. We listened to the *muezzin* intone the Muslim call to prayer over a warbling loudspeaker – a drone of Arabic singing and chanting that some obeyed and some ignored. And I felt an incredible *thickness* of the air around me – thick and stale with thousands of years of history and religion. I could sense the holiness of this place – just yards from the Temple Mount - and I felt a high honor to stand in this place and experience it.

We toured the Davidson Center, an archaeological museum that showed the extensive excavating that has been accomplished and continues to occur around the Temple Mount. We were briefed on the many eras of control over this land beginning with the Canaanite civilization to present day. We also saw a short film showing how the Temple and the Temple Mount would have looked in Jesus’ day. Given that image, we were able to decipher so much of the ruins.

We then headed into the Jerusalem marketplace – a series of streets and alleys that crisscross between the divided sections of the city. At times, the street was a dark, narrow, jumbled, canopied sidewalk with tiny shops stuffed into every niche available; other times, the street widened, turned, climbed or descended between buildings. It led through the Arab section, through the Jewish section, and on.



Vendors stood outside their shops to entice us to buy. Often, the goods were on display: we passed shops filled with jars of candy, bowls of olives and pickles, burlap bags of spices open for the sampling, stacks of breads and sweets along with T-shirt shops, shoe stores, and the requisite souvenir shops.

It was a strange and exciting labyrinth – old and new, pungent and sweet, Hebrew and Arabic all together.



We left the Old City, drove past the Valley of Gihenna, and stopped at a gift shop (clever trick – these owners were “friends” of our guides who offered us a free lunch in the back of the store). We had a choice between falafel and schwarma pita sandwiches – all good!

We made a quick stop at the place they call the Upper Room, now redone in Arabic flourish. There are a few collaborating pieces of evidence that suggest this *could* be the place, but most likely not. However, we did enjoy a reflective moment in prayer and praise as we remembered the words of Jesus in His last supper with His disciples.



Our last stop was the Garden Tomb, outside the city walls (located, actually, right next to the current Palestinian bus station). The walled-in garden site is nicely landscaped to create a tranquil environment for the Christian pilgrim. We had a captivating British guide who began unraveling all the components of the Garden Tomb site, supplying pretty solid evidence for its location here, outside the walls, and not at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the city. It’s easy (and probably advisable) to be skeptical of places claiming to be “genuine.” However, our guide had such a good presentation that we blocked out the honking busses and beeping taxis outside the walls and lost ourselves in the moment.

Stepping into the darkened *empty* burial chamber was a breathtaking moment for us. *Yes, He’s alive!*

We ended the day with communion in the garden – our time and place with God – thanking Him for all He’s done in our lives.



Back at the hotel, we were told that Jerusalem’s biggest synagogue, just a few blocks away, would allow visitors for their Sabbath service. So we walked up the street, found the Great Synagogue, and melted in with the crowds of people streaming up the steps. Inside, the men all had to take a *yarmulke* to enter the sanctuary. We women had to climb up three flights of stairs to the women’s and visitor’s section. We found creaky wooden seats in the balcony overlooking the service below.

Below, the cantor sang with his back to the men – singing, praying, rocking, and tossing his tasseled shawl from his shoulders to his head. Periodically the men would rise and shout/sing/call/proclaim something in Hebrew – a cacophony of voices lifted to God on this holy

night. Little boys wiggled on the benches below; teenaged boys looked bored but obedient –not a whole lot different than a church service, I suppose.

We joined the crowd of Jerusalem’s Jews pouring out of the synagogue and heading down the street in groups and clusters. The high, holy service was over. Many would go back to life-as-usual before long.

Day Five – Saturday (Jerusalem, Via Dolorosa, Bethlehem)

Another day in the Old City. Near the Temple Mount, we passed through a security checkpoint and entered the Western Wall plaza. Many orthodox Jews gathered for their Sabbath prayer here. They were identified by their attire: some had tall, black top hats; others wore square box-like hats. Some had long side curls, or a fringed and tasseled prayer cloth on. Most wore long black coats, black pants and shoes. Some were heavily bearded; some were clean shaven.

As our guide pointed out, these differences are attributed to the dispersion. These Jews came from many different lands and, even though they retained their Judaism during centuries (even millennia) of dispersion, had picked up subtle differences that set them apart today. Our Israeli guide, Shlomo, is from Iraq. His family moved to Israel in the 1950’s. The most notable historical dispersion of the Jews into that region was the Babylonian Captivity in 606 BC. It’s amazing, that a religion and a people can keep themselves identifiable after so many thousands of years of being scattered.

We then went back into the maze of Jerusalem’s streets to follow the Via Dolorosa, the “way of sorrows” that Jesus walked on His way to the cross. It is a pilgrimage site – the faithful walk in groups, stopping at “stations” along the way that commemorate events of the day – the place where Jesus stumbled, the spot where Simon of Cyrene helped carry the cross, the *Ecce Homo* (*Behold the Man*) Arch where Pilate confronted Jesus.

We stopped for other observances on the route: the ruins of the Pool of Bethesda, where the sick were brought to wait for a healing. Nearby was a church in the name of Mary’s mother, St. Anne, supposedly marking the spot of Mary’s birth. It had tall, graceful stone arches sweeping high overhead. Led by Richard, we began singing loud “Hallelujahs,” cutting the last syllable abruptly to hear the tones reverberate off the stone interior. I believe we timed about 10 seconds of heavenly echo – *awesome!* I told David that we needed to seriously consider redecorating our church at home – higher ceilings and more stone surfaces!

The final station on the walk was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a dark and imposing relic-filled building filled with devout pilgrims in various stages of worship: some knelt and kissed the objects on display, some bowed their heads in prayer. We wandered through the hallways and rooms to see the place the Queen Helen declared to be the spot of the crucifixion. We did not, however, go into the shrine-like wooden box that took up most of one room. Outside that box, a long line of people wrapped itself twice around the structure, each person hoping to get in a glimpse whatever that box housed. We had been told that this church, being a “holy” site, was overseen by four main churches: the Catholics, the



Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Church, and the Coptic Church. Each church was given a portion over which they maintained control. The poor Coptics had nothing but a tiny tent pitched at the back of this wooden behemoth. The Greeks, in their zeal for relics, had adorned much of the building with hanging gas lamps and candles. It was dark and pungent, old and worn on the inside, and we found it somewhat distasteful and distracting.

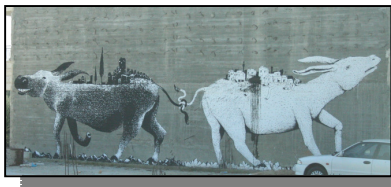


We were to eat lunch in Bethlehem, so we took the short ride (maybe 10 or 15 minutes) outside of Jerusalem. The “little town of Bethlehem” was well hidden behind the steel wall, security gate and barbed wire. And just in case we weren’t put off by those sights, the caution signs that indicated we were about to enter a military zone made us a bit nervous. Our Israeli guide and Israeli bus driver were not permitted to escort us in; rather, we had to walk through the checkpoint ourselves and meet our Palestinian guide and bus on the other side of the wall.



We entered beneath the word *Peace* in Hebrew, Arabic, and English.

It was a long, caged-in walk along the wall until we finally reached our guide. The wall – this side, facing inward toward Bethlehem – was filled with graffiti in many languages. Our guide was a gentle-speaking Palestinian who, although he seemed somewhat apologetic about the condition of his city, still spoke glowingly of what he had to offer.



Our first stop was the restaurant – so Middle Eastern! We sat at low, square tables. Waiters brought bowl after bowl of items to pass around the table: hummus and

peppers and beets and olives and pita bread. But the best was saved for last – long skewers of roasted lamb and beef!



Afterward, we toured an area called the Shepherd's Fields, and ducked into a small grotto that shepherds could have used for shelter during the night. It had some tacky Christmas decorations in it – clumsy crèche figures and strings of lights and greenery – but lacked the overdone, ornate ostentation of some of these edifices we've seen built on "holy" sites.

Bethlehem's biggest Christian attraction is the Church of the Nativity. This church is operated by three sects – the Catholics, who control one of the main chapels; the Greek Orthodox, who control another large portion including the downstairs "grotto" where Jesus was born; and the Armenians, who one day simply took a small portion of the church by force, roped it off, and called it their own. They promptly erected an altar, hung a few gas lamps, and proclaimed it their area for worship. In times past, the three factions have fought so over the sacred grounds that a Turkish guard had to be posted near the front door to restore order!

We had a leisurely time to shop for souvenirs before we returned to the wall. On the other side, our Israeli driver and guide were waiting. We stopped to take pictures with some of the soldiers outside, and then returned to our hotel. We had become fairly spoiled with the big meals we were enjoying at the hotel. Each night there were tables and tables of buffet-style food laid out – some we recognized, some we did not. It was all delicious, and we understood the Biblical reference to Israel as a land "flowing with milk and honey."

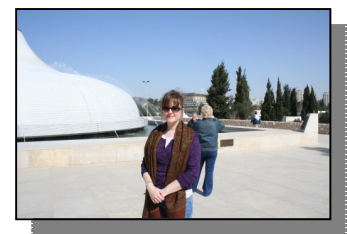
Day Six – Sunday (Holocaust Memorial, Israeli Museum, Western Wall Tunnels)

We drove this morning to *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust museum and memorial. We spent the early morning wandering through the well-designed memorial. It was long and narrow and we crisscrossed back and forth as we moved toward the far end which was higher, wider, and brighter – an openness that signified the end of the atrocities we had just seen. It was a sobering visit.



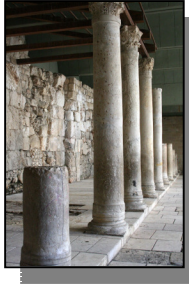
Next we went to the Israeli museum located next to the Knesset, Israel's seat of government. Outside, we circled a huge scale model of Jerusalem from the second Temple period. Buildings, streets, mountains and valleys, walls and gates were painstakingly laid out to recreate the city as it probably looked in Jesus' day. Our guide, so skilled in history and archaeology, really made the model come alive for us.

The *Shrine of the Book*, Israel's museum dedicated to the Dead Sea Scrolls, has a wide, rounded dome shaped to resemble the top of a clay jar like the ones in which the scrolls were found. This, too, was a fascinating museum, made all the more important to us because we had been to Qumran already.



We headed back to the Old City of Jerusalem, and entered through the Zion Gate. We stopped in the Jewish Quarter, in the street between two restaurants.

"Who want pizza, go to this side," said Shlomo, pointing left. "Who want falafel, go to that side. But don't mix pizza with falafel. You break kosher law!" So our group separated. David and I chose the falafel – it can't be beat.



Shlomo led us through the *Cardia*, an ancient colonnaded thoroughfare lined with shops that bisected a portion of the old city. We walked on stones from millennia ago, sidestepped columns on the ground that had not yet been reconstructed, and wandered in and out of the artsy shops that are still in this first-century mall.

There was evidence of a wall from Hezekiah's time visible from inside the mall.

We stopped at a small shop run by two Jewish brothers who loved to dialogue with people about their faith. We squeezed into the tiny shop, already at capacity with another tour group, and tried in vain to listen to the shop owner wax eloquent on his belief system.

We didn't stay long, but left this delightful little shop and headed for the Western Wall Plaza. This was a day for *Bar Mitzvahs*, and the area was full of people celebrating young boys' passages into adulthood with ceremonies at the Western Wall.



Some of our group went down to the wall to actually touch the stones that were part of Herod's original retaining wall for the Temple Mount. Several ladies of the group went to the women's side to pray. I lingered to take pictures in the open plaza, and then turned to join the women. I was stopped by an Israeli soldier who told me there was a "suspicious package" in the area, apparently near the entrance to the women's side. For about a half hour, we watched as the soldiers cordoned off the area – sealing our women behind a barricade – to deal with the problem. They called in specialists who took the "package" – we never really saw what it was – off to the side and destroyed it. This seems to be a fairly common occurrence, but it rattled us, nonetheless.

The Western Wall is revered by the Jews because it is the only remaining portion of Herod's original walls for the Temple Mount. The structures above have long ago been destroyed or built over, and nothing else remains from this time period. Just recently, the Jews have carved tunnels under the rubble that covers the rest of the wall, and have created a passageway all the way from the visible portion of the Western Wall to the Antonio Fortress at the far corner.



Our guide led us down into these tunnels, and we got to walk this length of wall, newly exposed after so many centuries, and brush our fingertips against the stones from Herod's time. Massive stones – some were calculated to be up to 500 tons! It was exciting to traipse through this dark passage that once had been an open, probably bustling, street at the base of the Temple Mount. How many of the faithful Jews had walked this path on their way to make sacrifice in the Temple courtyard?

The final flight of stairs led us back up into the present-day Jewish quarter, by the ruins of the Antonio Fortress near the place where Jesus was tried and convicted by the Romans. We now stood at the spot near where Jesus began His walk down the *Via Dolorosa*. We left the Old City through the Lion Gate (also known as Stephen's Gate, for it is thought that Stephen was brought through this gate to be stoned outside the city. He would become the first martyr for Jesus.).

Day Seven – Monday (Jerusalem at leisure)

A brisk 10-minute walk led us from our hotel, the *Dan Panorama Jerusalem*, to the Jaffa Gate of the Old City. Using a guidebook, we found our way back to the *Cardia*, and eventually back to *Shorashim*, the shop run by the Jewish brothers who enjoy healthy dialogue. David, Rusty, and Jerry were anxious to engage Moshe, the spokesperson for the two brothers, in biblical discussion and spent a good 20 minutes or so taking turns posing and answering questions.

Richard Page stopped in the shop and informed us that the Palestinians were opening the Temple Mount in about an hour. We headed out, making a stop for Rusty to buy a *shofar*, which he slung over his shoulder in its velvet carrying case.



Richard led us first to a small storefront called The Temple Institute. The front of the building was a shop crowded with assorted gifts of ancient and modern Judaica. In the back of the shop, we visited a museum dedicated to the building of the third temple – priestly garments, new versions of the temple furniture, and plans and blueprints for what still had to be made. There was also a scale model replica of the temple. Very interesting, however, the shop owner would neither confirm nor deny the rebuilding of the third temple.

When the Temple Mount was finally opened, Richard led us up the narrow ramp with the following instructions: “Don’t bring a prayer shawl, or a Bible. Don’t act like you’re praying or leading a prayer or Bible study. We don’t want an incident.”

The Temple Mount is large area, with wide open spaces, and an almost park-like atmosphere. The *Al-Aqsa Mosque* was to our left. We saw the Mount of Olives rising behind the far edge of the platform. Up a flight of steps in the center of the mount sits the *Dome of the Rock*, one of Islam’s holiest spots, but contested by Jews because it sits where the temple once stood. The mosque is not a large building, but is beautiful with its ornate glass mosaics of blue and green.



We wandered across the top platform to the right – the eastern side of the Temple Mount away from the Western Wall to our left and below us. Descending a small flight of stairs, we came to the Eastern Gate – the bricked-up entrance to the Temple Mount. The Jews have long held to the biblical prophecy that Messiah would come to reign by first appearing at this Eastern Gate. The Muslims, knowing the prophecy, bricked in the entrance and planted a graveyard on the outside, hoping to prevent such an occurrence. Christians believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy, and that no amount of bricks, mortar, and graves can stop what He intends to do. Anyway, it was eventful for us to

stand in a place that figures so prominently in both the history and the future of Jerusalem.



We ate lunch in a trendy, new coffee/sandwich shop – an Israeli Starbucks, I guess – and headed back to the hotel. One last shower before dinnertime and our flight home!

While waiting for dinner, several of us walked around the corner to the King David Hotel for a cup of coffee. This hotel has served as a base for journalists and dignitaries since the '40's. It was grand and opulent; we enjoyed the coffee and the view of the sun setting over the walls of Jerusalem.



There is a building code in the city: everything in Jerusalem must be made of Jerusalem stone. The stone can be polished, chiseled, or left natural but it must be the pinkish-white limestone native to this area. Why? Because when the sun sets, it casts a rosy-golden hue on the stone surfaces, and Jerusalem radiates a tranquil glow in the heart of this land. It couldn't have been a more perfect ending to a wonderful trip – it prepared us for riding off into that glorious sunset.

