

# The Holy Land Part 1 – Tel Aviv to the Sea of Galilee

## The Holy Land

### Part One: Tel Aviv to the Sea of Galilee, Israel

February 20-21, 2010

Dateline: Tel Aviv

Latitude at Tel Aviv, 32.6 Degrees North, Longitude 34.47 Degrees East

We have waited several years to take a trip to the Holy Land, thinking that any day now, or for that matter, any decade now, things would calm down and it would be safer to travel there. While not exactly peaceful, the situation has progressed from suicide bombings, shooting and missile firing to occasional name-calling, rock throwing and vociferous demonstrating, although we are given to understand that this could deteriorate at the drop of a *yarmulke* (the Yiddish word for the skull caps worn by Jewish men, although the Hebrew word is *kippah*). Anyway, we decided to take a leap of faith (no pun intended) and book a trip while we are still young enough to dodge any rocks coming our way. And really there was hardly any bombing and only sporadic gunfire (just kidding about this part – no injuries or fatalities while we were there unless you count maybe that Hamas guy in Dubai the authorities think the Mossad took out). To answer the question, “Is it safe to visit?”, the answer is yes, safer than any major American city you can name and lots of minor ones. Injury or harm to tourists from violence is really unheard of nowadays. It is

much more likely that, if anything, you might be inconvenienced or not able to visit certain places.

On February 20, we set out with our friends Stu and Sharon to explore the holiest (and the most hotly contested) places in the world of the three major religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. We had an overnight flight of 10.5 hours to Tel Aviv after a short (too short as it turned out) connection at JFK in New York. We made the flight to Tel Aviv, but our luggage did not. Fortunately we had a few extra things in our back packs to get by until the next day's Delta flight arrived.



Tel Aviv  
Promenade

By 5:00 p.m. we were at the Metropolitan Hotel, a modest and unassuming sort of low-rise, just a block off the beach on the Mediterranean Sea. We were thinking modest and unassuming are really the way to go, just in case any terrorist types decide to make a political statement by attacking a snooty high-rise sort of place. We walked the block over to the Beach Walk Promenade to stroll around a bit and to have a cocktail before dinner. With the mosaic walkways, we found it a little reminiscent of Rio de Janeiro, but without all that bare flesh, which is a good thing since the temperatures were only in the low 60's and falling. We had some excellent calamari at a beachfront restaurant and bar, before eating a most unremarkable buffet style meal at the hotel. We would come to actually recoil from the hotel buffets in the days to come, but more on that later.

Israel is a very young country (declared as such in 1948) in a very old land. Tel Aviv is a very young city as far as the Middle East goes, but looks a little worn in places – sort of like Miami before South Beach, or Atlantic City before Donald Trump. In places it had sort of a bombed-out look – missing plaster, exposed ironwork, hanging electrical wires. We later learned that one spot in particular which we took to be a nightclub in a former life, was the site of a suicide bombing several years ago in which 14 people were killed. It is back in business, but looks pretty shabby. And speaking of night life, the big dance craze here currently is salsa. The “hora” as performed to the tune of “Hava Nagila” is more or less relegated to the same status as “The Chicken Dance” here in the US (i.e. reserved for wedding receptions and anniversary parties).



Beach at Tel  
Aviv

The city was established in 1909 in the sand dunes just north of the ancient Arab port of Jaffa. The name Tel Aviv means Hill of Spring, but it does not mean a hill formed the usual way by Mother Earth. *Tels* in Israel are the result of one set of buildings built on the foundations of previous ones, which over the centuries creates a hill. We didn't see many sights since it was getting dark rapidly, but we did happen to stroll by the US Embassy, a rather squat, squared off fortress sort of building, which was very well fortified with barbed wire, barricades, armed soldiers and admonishments that photos should not be taken. We hoped we would not need any embassy services during our stay since getting inside looked to be a

daunting task indeed. Much of the downtown architecture of Tel Aviv is Bauhaus (international Modernist style) with asymmetrical rounded facades, ribbon like windows, curves and ledges – not at all typical of my idea of the Middle East.

Politics are quite a lively affair here –picture the recent health care debate with all the participants on speed. Benjamin Netanyahu is the current prime minister, but with 24 political parties, all politicians have to rely on coalitions of multiple factions, so it makes it a pretty delicate dance to keep your power base here. The currency is the “shekel” which is roughly equivalent to 25 cents. Israel is not an inexpensive place to visit and thus we found ourselves making many trips to the Shekel Machines (ATM’s) over the course of our stay.

**February 22, 2010**

**Dateline: Tel Aviv, Israel**

We had a free day today to get acclimated to the time change so we are doing our own free lance tour (also known as the Ama-tour) with our professional tour starting tomorrow. We had a strange breakfast with lots of raw vegetables, bread and cheese, but no meat since this is a kosher hotel (no meat and dairy served at the same meal, and no pork anywhere, anytime which really starts to wear on you after a while if you like your bacon and pork chops as we gentiles living in the South tend to do). After breakfast, we took a local bus to the University of Tel Aviv campus to visit the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora (the Hebrew name is Beit Ha-Tefusoth, which probably explains why several students we stopped to ask for directions had no idea what we were talking about since we had no idea how to pronounce it). All I know is you can experience some serious spittle in your face if you are too close when the name is said correctly in Hebrew. En route we got to see another (more residential and better groomed side of the city). The museum is a huge multi-story affair whose purpose

is to explain how the Jews became dispersed around the globe over the centuries and influenced world culture and world history.

The history of the Holy Land can take volumes and volumes to cover in detail, but for journal purposes, let me try to condense it to the bare essence – and this only as a framework for what we saw. In the fewest words possible, what happened in the land that the State of Israel now occupies, plus or minus a few hundred square miles was this:

The earliest documented people were the Canaanites, with the walled city of Jericho being the oldest known, dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century BC. You may recall that the walls came tumbling down when Joshua arrived on the scene and blew his horn. This was also the time, give or take a few centuries, the era of Abraham when the Patriarchs ruled. Then the Egyptians invaded in 1468 BC and ran things for a while and there was the mass exodus and ensuing bondage in Egypt, as described in the Bible. Around 1200 BC the Philistines (later called Palestinians) arrived by sea and settled on land they termed Palestine. About the same time, the Hebrew Tribes came back, led by Moses, and established , over the next few centuries, a political entity known as Israel and they became known as Israelites. So thus the seeds for the three thousand year feud were sown, although the two factions did seem to get along okay from time to time. From 1020 BC to 930 BC there were 3 monarchs of note: King Saul, (who battled the Philistines), King David (slayer of Goliath) and King Solomon (builder of the first Jewish Temple). In 930 BC upon the death of Solomon, the Kingdom split into North (called Israel) and South (called Judea).

Even with the Kingdom divided, all was still cool until 722 BC when the Assyrians (from present day Syria) invaded Israel and expelled the Jews in the north in the area called Israel. Then in 587 BC the Babylonians (from current day Iraq) drove the

Assyrians out, and pushed further south where they destroyed the First Temple, forcing the Jews in Judea into exile (a.k.a. slavery) back to Babylonia. Then in 538 BC the Persians (from current day Iran) conquered the Babylonians. So you can see how the seeds of discord were sown among these people as well. The leader of the Persians, Cyrus the Great, allowed the Jews to come back, and the Second Temple was built on the ruins of the first. It is abundantly apparent how the troubles in the Middle East have been cooking for a long time, and today's skirmishes are pretty small potatoes compared to the warfare of the olden days, at least as long as no one launches any nukes.

In 332 BC, Alexander the Great (originally from Macedonia, just north of Greece) appeared on the scene, and ran off the Persians. Of course when any one is called "the Great" it usually means that a great deal of killing and general mayhem has taken place, along with imposed religious and cultural changes. As a result of this particular conquest, there were Greek city-states set up in a group of 10 called the Decapolis. Once Alexander died, power was split up among 3 generals, and then the Second Temple was rededicated as a Temple of Zeus, which in turn, set off a Jewish rebellion in 164 BC and Jerusalem and the Temple were taken back. A group called the Hasmoneans rose to power in Judea, but they had a running battle with a Hebrew religious sect called the Pharisees, which ultimately led to a major, really major, blunder, I.E. both sides appealed to Rome to support their cause.

The Romans, of course, jumped right on it, and in 63 BC took over Jerusalem and they installed their own governors, called procurators. Then in 37 BC, Herod (also "the Great"), took over as client King, meaning he was king of Judea, but was not absolute king – he ruled at the pleasure of the Caesar of Rome. He died in 4 BC and his sons ruled briefly, (and poorly). His sons were also named Herod (maybe this is where

George Foreman got the idea), but they generally had other names associated with them so we can tell who was whom. The Herod ruling at the time Jesus died was Herod Antipas.

And if things weren't complicated enough, one Herod's wife left him to go marry his other brother, Herod, who dumped his first wife for her. Her name was Herodias and yep, she was a descendant of Herod, the Great too, so apparently there were not all that many forks in the family tree. John the Baptist, who had the misfortune to openly criticize Herod for such incestuous antics angered Herodias to the point that she demanded his head on a platter (delivered courtesy of arrangements made by her daughter Salome). But I digress – back to the “brief” history. At this point the Romans were governing directly from Rome, the Jewish Revolt took place and was put down most harshly, the Second Temple was destroyed and the Jews were again exiled and scattered all over the globe in what is termed the Diaspora, peaking around 135 AD.

In 306 AD, Constantine, a converted Christian, became Emperor of Roman Empire and ruled until 337 AD. Then in 385 the Empire split into East and West and the Holy Land fell under, the East, the Byzantine rule. To fast forward things a bit, in 638 AD the Arabs conquered the Byzantines and introduced Islam and built the Dome of the Rock and the El- Aqsa mosque on the spot where the Holy Temples had been on Temple Mount – igniting outrage among the Jews in a controversy still as volatile today as it was then. And then the Turks captured Jerusalem in 1071, and then the Crusaders took it in 1099 and then in 1187 Saladin, sultan of Syria and Egypt defeated the Crusaders and the Holy Land was ruled by former slave guards of his called the Mamelukes. Then in 1516, the Ottoman Turks defeated the Mamelukes and remained in power until the end of WWI when Turkey ended up on the losing side, and thus Great Britain took over the governing of the area in what was called the British Mandate. Then in 1948, as thousands of displaced Jews flooded back to the “homeland”, the British left and the

Jewish State was declared.



At the Museum  
of the  
Diaspora

So with that not too brief, and far from thorough history, I will pick up the action of our Holy Land Tour. After the Museum of the Diaspora, we took a bus back downtown to Rabin Square which is sort of the heart of Tel Aviv. It was here by City Hall that Yitzak Rabin was assassinated in 1995 while attending a peace rally of all things – apparently not everyone liked the idea of peace. The assassin who confessed was an Israeli college student who was opposed to Rabin’s peace talks with Egypt, but conspiracy theories abound as to who was really behind it. From there we walked to the Beach Walk Promenade for a pleasant seaside lunch and then on to the open air Carmel Market which offers everything from freshly baked bread, spices, fish and fresh produce to shoes, lingerie and tourist gew-gaws in side-by-side stalls that line the narrow streets. In a way, it’s sort of like Walmart – you can get your bras and bagels all in one place. From the market we walked to the Intercontinental David Hotel and had some sunset cocktails, still hoping our luggage was coming in on one of the many flights we saw making their approach. The hotel (5 stars plus we suspect) was really elegant and the cocktails really pricy, so we sauntered back to our own hotel (of considerably fewer stars), for Round Two. We did get our luggage around 10:00 p.m. which was a good thing since we are to leave Tel Aviv tomorrow morning with our guide. We can’t really say we have properly “done” Tel Aviv, so much will have

to be planned for a second visit.

**February 23, 2010**

**Dateline: Caesaria and Haifa Israel**

Today we met our guide, Eilon (pronounced Eh-lon with the accent on the first syllable) and departed Tel Aviv for our first stop on the tour, Jaffa, a neighbor just south of Tel Aviv. Eilon regaled us with both tales of Israel and himself and his family to the point that it was hard to tell which was more colorful and entertaining. Eilon's parents were both Holocaust Survivors from Salonika, Greece who came to Israel in 1946 by way of Auschwitz. And this wasn't their first persecution – his ancestors were originally from Portugal and fled to Greece during the Inquisition. Eilon's parents met after being freed by the Russians at a refugee camp in Austria. His father was on a ship that was turned away by the British at Haifa, but he jumped overboard and swam to shore where he was sheltered, given dry clothes and vouched for by the locals. Eilon's mother came later once the British left. Eilon grew up on a kibbutz ( a communist style farm which is pronounced "key-boots" with the accent on "boots") and was in fact named after the dairy farm, Kibbutz Eilon where he lived and worked until he was 14. At 14 he went to military school and from there into the Israeli Army where he became a colonel in a tank unit and then served in the Israeli Special Forces. While in the army, he became an arms dealer, specializing in captured tanks. After leaving the Army he had his own security consulting company, where he essentially trained body guards for whoever might need their bodies guarded all over the world. Now he has more or less settled down doing tours, running marathons and teaching martial arts. He absolutely looks the part – a dead ringer for Bruce Willis (the current day Bruce) with no hair to speak of and that wiry, tough guy Navy Seal-Delta Force look.

We also learned much about Israel, e.g. the population is 7

million, 6 million of which are Jewish. The idea of Israel as an independent country was the brainchild of a wealthy Hungarian in 1898 who proposed that wealthy Jews to buy up land in Palestine, which they did with some success. It took another 50 years for the Israel to be declared an independent country (or a State) by David Ben Gurion in 1948. In this speech he said "Tonight we dance, tomorrow we fight" and fight they did with all their neighbors, who gradually and grudgingly gave up the land to which hundreds of thousands of displaced Jews began to emigrate. In 1948, 7% of the population was Jewish, but today 80% of the population is Jewish, and so it's no big mystery why the Palestinians are pretty unhappy with the direction things are going in the country once known as Palestine.

Today the country is somewhat larger than in 1948, although it is still small – roughly 300 miles long and 60 miles across at the widest point. The current size dates from the 1967 Six Day War in which Israel took Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria and the West Bank of the Jordan river from Jordan. Israel did give the Sinai back and reportedly offered Gaza, but the Egyptians said no thanks, we don't need the headache of all those impoverished Palestinians, or something to that effect. Israel is still hanging on to the Golan, although Syria still wants it back. Israel is keeping the West Bank, having made peace with Jordan, but they still have the Palestinians to contend with.

Hebrew is the official language of Israel, although prior to establishment of the Jewish State, it was used only for religious purposes. Yiddish is a combination of Hebrew and German that arose in Eastern Europe. In Jesus' time the language was Aramaic, first introduced by the Assyrians and closely related to Hebrew. It is spoken today in isolated communities in current day Turkey. Arabic is also widely spoken in Israel, as is English. Eilon speaks Hebrew, Arabic, English, French and Greek fluently, plus a smattering of other

languages.



Ancient city  
of Jaffa

We drove into Jaffa, (aka Joppa) an ancient trading seaport, famous for its oranges even today, and parked inside the city walls for a short visit. The city was supposedly founded by Noah's son (after the flood that is), Japheth and scientists concur that it is indeed ancient with relics dating back to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The Bible states that "Joppa" is the seaport from which Jonah departed on the journey in which his close encounter (extremely close) with the whale took place. Jaffa is built on a "tel", which is currently undergoing laboriously painstaking excavation. We strolled through some of the ancient streets of the Artist's Quarter, so called because the old Byzantine era warehouses have been turned into galleries, although many are closed due to the recession's affecting tourism to such an extent. The main attraction here in Jaffa is a visit to the house of Simon the Tanner, where the Apostle Peter (aka St. Peter or Simon Peter ) occasionally stayed as documented in Acts 9:43. (Acts , the 5<sup>th</sup> book of the New Testament tells of the "acts" or history of the apostles as they go forth to spread the gospel) It was here on the roof of Simon the Tanner's house (rooftops were commonly patio-like things in those days) that Peter had a vision and heard the voice of God telling him that no



Old Jaffa  
Street near  
Simon the  
Tanner's House

one is beyond redemption and he should spread the gospel to all people – gentiles as well as Jews. And he also told him that keeping kosher dietary laws is no longer necessary.

Peter is also said to have raised a woman named Tabitha from the dead, along with other miracles, which consequently convinced many villagers to believe in Christ as the Son of God. It wasn't exactly Christianity as we know it because that was not established formally until 332 AD. However there were a great many followers of the disciples who spread the teachings of Jesus in the time prior to the establishment of Christianity, who are sometimes sort of facetiously referred to as Jews for Jesus, which more or less accurately describes them.

From Jaffa we drove north up the Mediterranean coast on roads lined with large tracts of eucalyptus that have been planted to soak up excess water in order for wetlands to be able to become farmland. We stopped mid-morning at the ruins of Caesarea, (pronounced See-sare- ee-ah with the accent on "sare") built by the Roman Emperor, Herod, (the Great, not the Herod Juniors) between 29 and 22 BC, upon the ruins of a Phoenician city. He created an entire city complex whose original purpose was to provide a deep water harbor, but it became much more than that with a hippodrome, amphitheater, stadium, temples and palaces. It was home to 12,000 people in Herod's time, but later it grew to as many as 30,000. Even

today it is considered an engineering marvel –with an aqueduct, sea walls and an elaborate de-siltation system to keep the harbor deep enough for ships to use.



### Amphitheater at Caesaria

Pontius Pilate lived in Caesarea and journeyed to Jerusalem at Passover where he condemned Jesus to death in 33 AD. St Paul was a frequent visitor here and on his last visit, he was arrested for spreading the gospel after the Crucifixion. He was imprisoned here for 2 years before being sent to Rome in chains. Problems in Caesarea started in 66 AD with rioting against the client king and Roman rule in general. Nero (then Caesar of Rome) sent Vespasian to Caesarea to quell what was called the Great Revolt. Four years later, Vespasian's son, Titus, lay siege to the Holy Mount in Jerusalem for 4 months. Once it fell, he tore down the Second Temple, depriving Judaism of its most sacred site. A note on destroying temples, fortresses etc. – although they take years and years to build, they could be torn down in rather short order by removing the keystones of the various archways. Often the building blocks would then be taken for new structures.



Herod's Palace  
Pool at  
Caesaria

Caesarea continued to expand and prosper until around 614 AD when it began a slow decline. The next construction in the area came around a thousand years later when the Crusaders built a much more modest fortress here on top of a portion of the Roman ruins in their efforts to conquer the Holy Land. After centuries of neglect and with absolutely no eye toward future tourism, the Mamelukes destroyed the fortress and as much of the ruins as they had the time and energy for. Fortunately, the Romans really knew how to build stuff and they built so much of it, we were able to enjoy an impressive array of Herod's legacy.

From Caesarea we drove north to the town of Megiddo through the Jezreel Valley, the most fertile in Israel. It looks much as it did in ancient times, except for modern roads. Because it is early spring the hillsides are covered with the bright yellow blossoms of wild mustard, growing since Biblical times along with purple thistle and bright red poppies. It is the Megiddo area that is referenced in Book of Revelation in the Bible, (taken from Har Megiddo, with "har" meaning mountain, and later translated as Armageddon), where the final battle of the whole world between good and evil is supposed to take place as the world as we know it comes to an

end. Many fierce battles have taken place in this valley over the centuries that may have seemed like the battle to end all battles, but so far, the world still turns on its axis. We were amazed that so much Biblical history has played out in

the landscape before us. The lesser non-Armageddon battles included one in 1468 BC when the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III destroyed the Canaanite fortress here. Then there was the one when Solomon took the fortress back and rebuilt it, but later the Assyrians took it, and so on and so forth. Battles of both World Wars were fought in this same valley. The last battle here was during the Six Day War in 1967. One reason the war only lasted six days was that on Day One Israel destroyed the entire Air Forces of Egypt and Syria. It is also through this valley that Israel deploys tanks to face off with Lebanon and Syria to the north.

The road we were traveling was the border with Jordan before the Six Day War in 1967. The area from this road to the Jordan River is now referred to as the West Bank and is heavily populated by Palestinians. The British had given this land to Jordan in the era of The British Mandate, so the argument could be made that historically the land was never really theirs, and so perhaps that is why Jordan doesn't insist on having it back in order to have peace with their neighbor. The boundary decisions made by the British were at the root of the Zionist movement in the 1970's, whose mission it was to take back land the British gave away, if not through war, then through "Settlement", even if other people (the Palestinians) are already living on that land. This controversy continues to make headlines as recently as today.



Jezreel Valley

We went to the top of the tel which afforded wonderful views across the Jezreel Valley to Nazareth and Migdal (the home of

Mary Magdalene), Mt Tabor (where the apostles Peter, James and John witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus, *i.e.* he was shown to them to be the Son of God as he said he was), Mt Gilboa where the injured King Saul fell on his sword rather than be captured by the Philistines, the Hill of Moreh (where Gideon is said to have camped, prior to leading the Israelites against the Midianites who were nomadic raiders) and Mt. Carmel where Elijah challenged 45 prophets of the pagan god Baal to a contest to see whose deity was truly God. Elijah won the challenge when God send down a bolt of fire to ignite his pile of wood. It turned out rather badly for the Baal prophets since Elijah either killed them personally or had them killed. Since there were 450 of them, it is likely he had some help, but the Bible isn't very clear on this point.



Tel Megiddo  
Excavations

From the top of the mesa-like hill which is Tel Megiddo, we could see the major excavations going down layer upon layer of at least 20 successive settlements. The tel has a huge slice out of the middle, made by generations of archaeologists digging toward the bottom layer which goes back as far as 3,000 BC when this was a fortified city – and they are still digging down. Among the ruins here are those of one of Solomon's temples and the palace of Ahab and the infamous Jezebel, whose main evil deeds included idol worship (that pesky Baal again) and plotting to do away with Elijah for killing her guys. She is said to have committed suicide here by throwing herself off the palace balcony as enemy troops approached. However, another translation has her being thrown

off the balcony as God's punishment where she was to be consumed by dogs upon landing. Her weakling husband was said to have been killed and his blood licked by dogs. There is certainly no dearth of drama, nor blood and guts, in the Old Testament for sure.

We had the opportunity to walk down to and through a complex water system in the heart of the tel, carved out of rock during the time of the Israelite kings. It is connected to a spring outside the walls, which is today dried up, but it ran for centuries in ancient times and was concealed in the olden days. This way, the people inside the walls would not be exposed to their enemies in order to get water. We rejoined Eilon to drive to our next stop in a Druze village for a late lunch. We learned that the Druze are a branch of Muslims expelled from Egypt centuries ago. They are very loyal to Israel (or whatever country they happen to live in) and have their own flag and their own religious practices, which are kept secret. They try to blend in where ever they live and keep a low profile. You cannot convert to the Druze religion – you have to be born into it. If a person leaves the Druze community, they are shunned – sort of like the Amish in some respects. There are only around 150 thousand Druze in Israel, concentrated around Mt. Carmel and the Golan Heights. They believe in reincarnation and that God gives his message to each person, with no intermediaries required. The mainstream Muslims consider the Druze traitors to the religion for their loyalty to Israel. The Druze men typically wear handle-bar mustaches, elaborate droopy things – sort of like Yosemite Sam. Traditional dress for men is pleated pantaloons and a tarboosh which a felt fez-like cap. The women wear black dresses and simple white head coverings.

We went to a village up high on Mt. Carmel on the Haifa road called Daliat, with roadside stands selling olives and goat cheese along the way. The restaurant was called Abu Anter and was run by the Halabi family (which is a name as common a name

as “Smith” in Druze communities). Our host, Mr, Halabi, had the bushy mustache, but no pantaloons or tarboosh. We had delicious pita bread right out of the oven, and all sorts of things to spread on it like hummus,(made from chick peas), tahini (made from sesame seeds)and baba ganoush (made with egg plant) and a mixed grill with lamb and chicken that had been cooked on an outdoor home-made grill. Gary determined that the grill was made from salvaged refrigerator parts, so we were hoping that they had done enough cooking on it for past customers so we didn't get any leftover Freon or whatever on our kebabs. As a side note, when you have a kebab here, it is not on a skewer, but rather ground up and made into patties like sausage, but of course there is no pork involved. They don't seem to use the phrase “shish kebab” to describe things on skewers.

We left Daliat and wound our way down the mountains to the seaside city of Haifa which we found to be much like San Francisco in terrain, but with more of the L.A. weather. We checked into a hotel called the Dan Panorama, which compared to the Hotel Metropolitan in Tel Aviv, had a couple of more stars along with a lot more marble and crystal and there were sweeping views of the harbor below – in fact we termed it Haifa-lutin compared to the Metropolitan in Tel Aviv. We had our evening cocktails watching the sun set over the Mediterranean and another one of those hotel buffets that we really did not like so very much, but at least they sustained life.

**February 24, 2010**

**Dateline Haifa, Israel**

Haifa originally had a large contingent of German settlers who became quickly *persona non grata* in the post WWII mass immigration by Jews from all over Europe in 1946.This is where

Eilon's father swam ashore from one of the refugee boats. With the Germans leaving so abruptly, there were many housing opportunities for the newly arrived. The name "Haifa" means "Pretty City" in Hebrew and we found that the name fits. Haifa is noted for its protected harbor, which was the main seaport of the area for centuries, although now Ashdod is the major commercial port. Only 18 miles from the Lebanese border, the city was the target of Hezbollah rockets attacks in 2006, but the majority of the attacks were on Nahariya to the north. You may recall that Israel responded to the attacks with heavy bombing and an invasion 26 miles into Lebanon. They have since withdrawn and there is a cease-fire, but Israelis feel that Hezbollah seems to have reserved the right to ignore this agreement at will.



Baha'i Garden  
Haifa

Haifa is also known as the spiritual home to the Baha'i Faith, one of the world's newer religions started in Iran by a Persian nobleman named Bahauulla in 1842. Their basic belief is that God has sent another messenger (which happened to be Bahauulla) who is became The Bab, meaning the Gate to God. He is believed to be the latest messenger in a line of messengers that include Abraham, Jesus and Mohammed. Bahauulla was exiled from Persia and sent to what was then called Palestine, which was ruled by the Ottoman Turks. Shortly after his arrival, he was imprisoned in Akko just across harbor from Haifa, under a house arrest of sorts, and it is there that he wrote the Baha'i books. The Baha'i religion accepts all people and they believe that no single religion has a monopoly on God's

expectations of mankind or His wishes and plans. Their belief is that to achieve world peace, there should be no countries and no partisanship. It called to mind the words in John Lennon's song, "Imagine" where he wrote "imagine all the people, sharing all the world", which provides an interesting contrast to the Clint Eastwood "make my day" sort of mentality that one associates with Israelis.

Baha'i followers also believe the garden is an extension of the soul and have built a very impressive one encompassing a whole hillside above the Haifa harbor. We spent a brief time at the garden, looking down from the hilltop at a series of elaborately landscaped and painstakingly manicured terraces to the golden domed tomb of Bahauulla at the bottom, although it was somewhat obscured by scaffolding erected for renovation. Across the bay we could see the house where he lived and wrote while a prisoner in Akko. Akko, also called Acre, was the site of ferocious battles in Crusader times, with battles including such notables as Richard, the Lion Heart and Saladin among many others, with the city changing hands several times.



Basilca of the  
Annunciation –  
Nazareth

From Haifa we drove east, through the Jezreel Valley which we had seen from Mt. Carmel yesterday, to the town of Nazareth, Jesus' boyhood home. The city has had as bloody a history as any other in the Holy Land with a series of wars and struggles played out inside its walls. There are souvenir shops lining the street displaying more Virgin Marys and Baby Jesuses for

sale per square foot than any place in the country, and probably even the world. Our destination is the Basilica of the Annunciation, built so they say on the spot (a cave actually) where the Angel Gabriel told Mary that she was to give birth to the Son of God. It is said, although I was never to clear on this part, that he told Joseph as well so he would not be unduly alarmed with the pregnancy in which he played no role

The town is populated primarily by Christian and Muslim Palestinians who seem to have a media battle going on for the hearts and minds of tourists and Christian Pilgrims. Large billboards proclaim that there is only one God and that is Allah and bad things will happen to non-believers (I am paraphrasing here), while other signs direct people to the Christian sites. The Muslims have petitioned to build a mosque taller than the Church of the Annunciation and they really crank up the volume on the 5 times a day call to prayer. The Christians on the other hand have the 5 major churches in Nazareth and hordes of Christian pilgrims from all over the globe who inundate the city daily and keep the economy going buying up all the Baby Jesuses and Mother Marys. Many of these shops are Muslim owned and thus it continues to be delicate balance. We hope that economy continues to prevail over religion – it makes for a much more peaceful country.

The city was larger than we expected, and is in fact the largest Arab speaking city in Israel and quite Third World with the exception of our destination, the Basilica of the Annunciation. It is an imposing domed structure, sitting on a prominent hill overlooking the city. For hundreds of years the site has been maintained by Franciscan monks, who have so far managed to get along with their Muslim neighbors. The current Basilica of the Annunciation was built in 1969 on the ruins of an older basilica from Byzantine times built 1600 years ago.

It is quite imposing from the



The Mikveh at  
Joseph's House  
– Nazareth

outside, and inside very spacious, but also very simple. From the basilica we walked a short distance through a small garden to a church built in 1909 on the site that is believed to be where Joseph lived and had his workshop. We have found that almost every Christian site has had a church, or in some cases a series of churches, built over it, ostensibly to protect it. What is left below the church are ruins of walls, steps and part of a "mikveh", a pool for performing a cleansing ritual before prayer – a practice that is still in use in Judaism today.

We were told that we should not envision houses from Biblical times as they are today. Quite often limestone caves would be utilized as living quarters, stables and crypts (not at the same time, of course). They also refer to some places as grottoes, which are defined as small caves with an attractive feature (like ferns growing inside or a little spring) – making for an upscale cave, one can surmise. We also saw Mary's Well, the spot where an ancient spring provided water to all of Nazareth said to be used daily by the Virgin Mary and by Jesus as a boy. During the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, some crafty entrepreneur bottled the water and sold it in France, perhaps a forerunner of Evian.

We wondered how anyone knows today where events so far in the past actually transpired. The answer lies with Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, who later came to be St. Helena

in the Greek Orthodox Church. As I mentioned earlier, Constantine converted to Christianity, and his mother became a devout Christian who traveled to the Holy Land to research holy sites and ensure churches were built to protect them. She did this in 326-328 AD, but since things moved slowly back in those days, she was able to complete her mission/detective work with some degree of accuracy (plus or minus a few miles probably) and establish what events from the gospels happened where. An interesting side note – everywhere we went the Greek Orthodox “Holy Spot” was a few yards or sometimes miles from the Roman Catholic “Holy Spot”.

We had parked in a small lot in the main part of the town where our van was wedged in among several vehicles. Upon exiting, our vehicle, a Mercedes van, unfortunately exchanged paint with a Toyota. We were wondering if this is the sort of incident that triggers a riot between Christians and Muslims, So we watched with great interest as the Toyota driver came over to chat with Eilon. Rather than the expected fireworks, there was an apparently cordial conversation ending in warm “shaloms “and a few smiles and we drove on our way. It’s good to see an absence of road rage, especially in such a holy place. Eilon seemed to know just about everybody in Israel and he told us that 99.99 per cent of the time, Jews and Muslims get along just fine and quite often form life-long friendships. It is the radical elements of both religions that cause all the uproar.

Our next stop Just east of Nazareth, was the village of Cana, which for Jesus would have been about a two hour walk (although we drove). Here Jesus performed his first miracle when he turned water into wine for a wedding celebration as described in the Book of John. It was a sleepy little village then, and not much has changed in two centuries, as long as you can overlook the cars and utility poles. We visited a Franciscan Church that was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century upon the ruins of a previous church, believed to be the one from Jesus’

time where the wedding took place. It was at this wedding that Jesus met several of the men who would become his disciples. Eilon told us that many couples choose to renew their vows here and in fact the main sanctuary was closed for just such an event so we just peeked into the smaller chapel.



## The Sea of Galilee

From Cana we continued to drive East to the Sea of Galilee, 600 feet below sea level ,where we were scheduled for a boat ride and lunch. We were amazed to see ancient gnarled olive trees being hauled on flatbed trucks from time to time. Eilon says that they are sold to landscapers for the gardens of wealthy clients, particularly if they come from a special place such as around the Sea of Galilee. The Sea is actually fresh water, but is so large you often can't see the other banks, so in olden times, many assumed it was a fresh water sea. It was quite placid and a dark blue under sunny skies. To the east were the Golan Heights, a series of hills, green with recent rains and covered with wildflowers – not at all the menacing mountains you would envision as looming over Israel given the media coverage of rocket attacks. However, with missile launchers and tanks on them, It is apparent that they could certainly wreak havoc on most of Northern Israel.



## On the Sea of Galilee with the Priests

As it turned out the boat was quite large and thus we shared it with other people – and some very interesting people at that. There were 28 Catholic priests and their bishop on board on a pilgrimage from the Philippines. We rode out to the middle of the lake where we stopped for prayers and then we visited with the priests who we suspect might be real party animals if the bishop were not looking. They were some wild and crazy guys and really a lot of fun. They referred to the men's room as the "smiley place" because they say people are always happier once they have been. I do take issue with that – some toilets probably are happier places than others, given the frequent absence of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval we observed in some of the public places. Fortunately Eilon knows all the good "smiley places" and advises us well.



## The Golan Heights above the Sea of Galilee

We had lunch at a waterside restaurant and ate the special,

St. Peter's Fish, which is a delicious tilapia, caught fresh where our boat docked at a village called Ein Gev, the site of a former kibbutz, on the eastern bank of the Sea of Gallilee at the foot of the Golan Heights. After lunch, we drove around the southern end of the Sea to our hotel, which is on a kibbutz called Nof Genosaur, just outside of Tiberias. The idea of a kibbutz was conceived by European Jews in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The founding principles are self-sufficiency and equality with everyone working for the common good (a first cousin to Communism). The kibbutzim (that's the plural) were highly productive farming communities which governed themselves. People living there were called "kibbutzniks" and their greatest moment is said to be in the war for independence, when a group of kibbutzniks stopped an entire Syrian armored column in 1948.

Our rooms were converted from kibbutz dormitories and have had a few amenities added to cater to the tourist in each of us (like private bathrooms). We took a short walk to the lake shore, although it is a longer walk than it was during the days of the kibbutz. They have had a 5 year drought here and the water levels are down significantly, but the Sea is still as deep as 150 feet in places. The Sea is fed by the Jordan River and sits astride the Great Rift Valley which extends all the way into East Africa. That evening we drove into Tiberias, founded in Roman times by Herod Antipas, who you may recall was one of the sons of Herod, the Great. In what was no doubt a sucking up move, he named it after the Emperor of Rome, Tiberias. It became one of Judaism's holy cities with many notable scholars and rabbis living here. The Crusaders were also here and built St. Peter's Church. Today Tiberias is noted as tourist town featuring water sports and hot springs. We had dinner at a waterfront restaurant called The Decks, specializing in grilled food. We had fabulous salmon, lamb and beef. It was a rainy night which somewhat obscured what would have been great views of the Sea of Galilee and the Golan Heights beyond it. On the upside, the rain made for a

very restful night at the kibbutz so we could prepare for another day of hard-core touring.