**OUR VISIT TO ISRAEL - JUNE 2014**

26/06/2014

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I am just back from travelling with my wife, Yannie, in Israel, visiting friends & family, being a tourist in Jaffa & Jerusalem, practising my very rusty Hebrew and finally visiting Bethlehem for the [Bet Lahem Live!](http://www.betlahemlive.com/)festival.  I have put some of the [pictures](https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B1Y730moNS9JQWU4NExMSkFUZ0E&usp=sharing) on line for those interested.  We also used our time to strengthen out connections with groups working to bridge the divide between Jew & Arab, Israeli & Palestinian.

On Wednesday morning, we went to Ramat HaSaron to meet with Dt Tikva Bracha and her team at [A New Way](http://www.anewway.org.il/), a group working in schools throughout Israel to help young Jews & Arabs meet each other, often the first time they get to meet young people from the other "side" in a forum where they can talk as equals.  Afterwards we drove down to Jaffa where, standing outside St. Peter's Church and hearing muezzins from two mosques calling the muslim faithful to prayer, I thought that despite the many issues & problems Israel needs to deal with, it is still a beacon of religious tolerance in the region.

Later, we travelled up to [Newe Shalom~Whatad al Salem](http://wasns.org/-oasis-of-peace-), a village of Jewish & Arab families in the Judean hills near [Latroun Monastery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latroun) that is dedicated to peaceful coexistence between the two people.  We were delighted to talk to one of the members, Howard Shippin, from the village about the history of the settlement and how it is coping with the heighten tension between the communities.   Howard also took us on a tour of the village so we could see some of the developments and also see the [village’s school](http://wasns.org/-children-s-educational-system-), committed to bi-lingual education, is working in practise.

Our visit had coincided with one of those events that captures the public’s thoughts and almost puts everything else into the shade.  On the Thursday before we arrived, [three teenagers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_kidnapping_of_Israeli_teens) from the Jewish settlements near Bethlehem were kidnapped as they tried to hitchhike home from the religious seminary they were studying in.  It is being presumed by the Israeli authorities that [Hamas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamas) (who recently went into coalition with [Fatah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatah), the party of [President Abbas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Mazen)) was behind this action and[Netanyahu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binyamin_Netanyahu) and the Israeli security forces lost no time carrying out searches across the West Bank & re-arresting Hamas activists who had been released only months ago in exchange for [Gilad Shalit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilad_Shalit_prisoner_exchange).  This has lead the the inevitable rise in tensions across the West Bank and the Israeli Government seems to be using the kidnapping as an excuse to try to crush Hamas & destroy it’s Coalition with Fatah and this has led to more violence and the [killing](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/world/middleeast/israeli-troops-kill-palestinian-teenager-protesting-west-bank-arrests.html?hp&_r=0) of a number of Palestinians (including some children).

It was against this background we travelled down to Bethlehem (technically against Israeli law for me as an Israeli citizen).  Sadly, due to other commitments, we could only go on the Sunday of the Festival, which in some ways was a shame as there was more happening on the Friday or the Saturday.  We were in time to join in with a Multi-faith Prayer Meeting outside the [Church of The Nativity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity) in [Manger Square](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manger_Square) lead by Jonathan Katabi and included contributions from Abdul-Majid Atallah (the Mufti of Bethlehem), Fares Abu Farha (a pastor living in America but born in Bet Sachour near Bethlehem) and, as no rabbi was able to attend, an Israel Jewish lady but I didn’t catch her name.  All made very moving contributions about the need for forgiveness and not to let despair or hate take root.  We ended the Meeting with all joining hands to sing “We Shall Overcome” which both Yannie & I found very moving.  During the rest of the day we explored the area around Manger Square and along Star Street where most of the Festival is held, calling in on the volunteers from [The Holy Land Trust](http://www.holylandtrust.org/) who help organise the Festival, before joining an Open Panel on Justice in Monotheistic Religion with Jonathan Katabi (who is Chairman of The Holy Land Trust’s Board of Directors), Abdul-Majid Atallah, Fares Abu Farha and Dr. Munther Isaac from the Bethlehem Bible College and an expert on Biblical Judaism.  The discussion highlighted how much the three religions have in common, especial the “[Golden Rule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule)”, which [Rabbi Hillel the Elder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbi_Hillel) stated as “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn”.  The discussion finished with a question from the audience “If all three religions are committed to justice, why can’t they find a solution to the problems of the Middle East?”, which the panel only have a few minutes to answer but could have taken another 2 days!  The humanity of the Mufti, who has been arrested a number of times by the Israeli Security forces but had no hatred of Israel made a deep impression on both of us.  We were also deeply affected by seeing the “[Separation Wall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Separation_wall)”

Our stay in Israel was all to brief and we had to come back to the “normality” of home & work all to soon but what we brought away was our renewed commitment to help two countries & two people, who both have justice & right on their side, find a way to live in peace with each other in a small strip of land between the river & the sea and to support the people, groups & organisations in Israel & Palestine who are working to achieve this.

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