



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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Report from Israel: Happy Holidays!

On our between-the-semesters trip to Israel, Esther and I divided our time between visiting with our daughter Dafna in Jerusalem and staying in Tel Aviv.

To be sure, these are cities of contrast; Jerusalem, steeped in thousands of years of history, sacred to, fought over by, and now in some form of uneasy coexistence between Jews, Muslims and Christians. Surrounded by terraced hills and deep valleys.

Tel Aviv, only a little more than a century old, rising from the sand dunes on the Mediterranean coast. A modern city, tolerant to all, some would say to a fault, and the center of Israel's economy, technology and latest trends.

Whenever I am in Israel, I at first wonder what I will write about, what will I observe that will form a snapshot of Israeli society and culture, both on the small group and larger national level. Because of the time of the year my topics quickly came into view: Chanukah and Christmas.

Chanukah in Israel

Chanukah, a minor Jewish holiday; (no fasting, no dietary or work restrictions, and no unique synagogue service) has evolved into a major American Jewish holiday likely because of attempts to compete with Christmas, a major Christian holiday. In Israel, ever since the Zionist return to the Land in the late 19th century, Chanukah has also evolved into a major holiday. It is a nationalistic and militant holiday celebrating the return of Jewish power and autonomy in the Land of Israel.

But in Israel, as opposed to the Diaspora, Chanukah stands on its own; no need to compete, no need to culturally borrow from a host society; it is simply 'Here'. Israelis sing "*Nes Gadol Haya Po*" a great miracle happened "here" rather than, "*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*" - a great miracle happened "there", as we sing in America.

So, **here** we were privileged to spend all eight days of Chanukah in Israel. Chanukah seems to take over the streets and the very flow of daily events. The nine branched Chanukiot (the menorah which stood in the ancient Temples in Jerusalem had seven branches) are dis-

played in almost every store, restaurant and coffee shop. Large electric Chanukiot are lit at shopping malls, public buildings and some major intersections. Festive music is heard in the streets and on the radio. Many television shows are Chanukah themed. Chassidic and other religious performers give live musical shows in the streets along with religious pamphlets, free Chanukah candles to take home, and the opportunity to try on tefillin. Fried '*sufganyot*,' similar to jelly donuts, are sold in bakeries, coffee shops and supermarkets. A popular discussion topic is where to get the tastiest ones. These sufganyot, or jelly donuts, have gone 'designer' in recent years, with different toppings and fillings. Some purists bemoan this development and wax nostalgic for the old days of simplicity. After dark I witnessed caravans of middle school students putting on light shows across Tel Aviv by riding bicycles with electric Chanukiot strapped to their backs. On public bus rides, I noticed more than a few times, elderly riders lugging shopping bags full of gift-wrapped packages from Toys R Us (yes, this American chain store as well as many others are here in Israel). In conversations with other bus passengers, they explained that these were Chanukah presents for their grandchildren - all 'above average, of course'.

Wherever you turn, the greeting is 'Chag Sameach' (Happy Holiday). The end of the holiday is capped with 'Festigal' or the children's annual live song festival. In short, Chanukah is '**here**' a natural part of the Israeli calendar.

This year however, I was somewhat surprised to see something new- public displays of another holiday; greatly overshadowed by, but none the less existing next to Chanukah- a reverse image of what we experience in America. It is to this phenomenon that I now turn.

Christmas in Israel

On my recent trip to Israel, I noticed many signs of the Christmas holiday. In the past I expected to see Christmas lights and trees in places such as Nazareth, Bethle-

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hem, the Christian neighborhoods of Jaffa, Acre and Haifa, the Christian and Armenian Quarters of the Old City of Jerusalem and some villages with sizeable Christian populations in the Galilee region where most of Israel's Arabs live. Arabs make up about 20% of Israel's total population of around 8 million. Of this 20%, about 10% are Christian Arabs. This means that Christian Arabs are a 'minority within a minority' and constitute only 2% of the population of Israel, about the same percentage of Jews in the U.S.

Muslim Arabs and Christian Arabs are in a state of tension in Israel, struggling with each other over control of neighborhoods and towns, much in the way that different ethnicities might struggle in the U.S. over claims to contested urban areas. This may explain why Jaffa, which is part of Tel Aviv and inhabited by both of these groups, has a huge lit up Christmas tree in the very center of town. The Christian Arabs, a minority within a minority, feel threatened and want to symbolically proclaim their presence. The Christian Arabs in Israel have noted the fate of other Christian communities in the Arab countries of the Middle East and, perhaps, have also come to realize that they are most free and safe in Israel.

This time in Israel, however, I saw quite a few Christmas displays in shopping malls, shops, and other places in Jewish areas. The displays were of Christmas trees and a Santa here and there. I spoke with a number of Jewish Israelis who had already been or were planning to travel to see the 'Christmas Markets' so popular in Western Europe, especially in Austria and Germany. The initial explanations I came up with were that; a.) there were many immigrants from the former Soviet Union who identified either as Christian or just secular and wanted to keep alive the non-religious celebrations of Christmas that they were used to in the old country, b.) many foreign guest workers, legal as well as illegal, lived in Israel and brought their religious observances with them. Most of these workers are Christian and have established churches and neighborhoods in various parts of the country. c.) Israelis like to travel abroad and the Christmas Markets are just another part of a European vacation. d.) Israel is full of Christian pilgrims during the Christmas Holiday season and this is part of their welcome.

Eventually, I theorized that something else was at play here, a factor in addition to the above reasons. For Jewish Israelis who are a majority in their own country and sure of their identity as Jewish Israelis, Christmas is an exotic, interesting holiday, a part of another culture that does not constitute a threat to the Israeli Jewish identity. Christmas is a foreign holiday, one that is to be respected and experienced as something 'out there' and not 'here'. Christmas in Israel doesn't diminish Chanukah and it doesn't threaten Jewish continuity as happens in the U.S. for American Jews. Chanukah doesn't diminish Christ-

mas in the U.S., nor does it threaten Christian continuity. We see a certain parallel here. We see at play the different dynamics of minority or majority status. Only time will tell how this all eventually plays out for American and Israeli Jews. Until then, Happy Holidays to all those who celebrate! By Dr. Martin Laskin

Tel Aviv named among Forbes magazine's top destinations for 2020

In its December 2019 issue, the American business magazine Forbes ranked Tel Aviv among the 20 best destinations to travel in 2020.



"Ancient history and modern living meet in this bustling beach city along Israel's Mediterranean coast," said

the article, highlighting the new luxury Setai Hotel in Jaffa and the Bauhaus architecture that comprises Tel Aviv's White City, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

"While no day in this urban hot spot would be complete without a few hours on the golden sands (check into The Setai, Tel Aviv for a front-row seat to sea), you'll also want to make time for the newly opened White City Center," the magazine wrote.

"Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus architecture movement, the museum spotlights the city's unique look—the UNESCO-designated White City zone is home to more than 4,000 Bauhaus-style buildings, the largest such collection in the world," said the article.

Bauhaus is an architectural movement based on the teachings of the eponymous early 20th-century modernist German school of architecture and design. It is noted for its use of rectilinear forms, plain unadorned surfaces, and techniques and materials associated with industrial production.

According to the Tel Aviv municipality, the city welcomed over 1.5 million visitors from Israel and all over the world in 2018.

Tel Aviv was also ranked third on the Wall Street Journal's list of sites to visit in 2019, mentioning Jaffa's old city, as well as cafes and restaurants and various galleries and hotels.

The Forbes destination list is topped by Las Vegas, and Macau comes in third after Tel Aviv.

[israel21c.org and ynetnews.com]