

MICHAEL GIFFIN

A STUDY TOUR OF ISRAEL



I WENT ON A study tour of Israel in June this year, my first but hopefully not my last. During the preceding months, friends and acquaintances expressed concerns absorbed from the grapevine and the media. They warned: It's a war zone! They prophesied: Once the Israelis stamp your passport, you'll never travel anywhere else in the Middle East again! They lamented: What about the poor Palestinians!

The raid on the flotilla heading for Gaza happened two days before I left, which created a certain frisson, which increased on the day I left, as I was travelling to Israel alone via Istanbul, and Turkey had just recalled its ambassador. But the service and the food in economy on Turkish Airlines were both excellent—much better than anything in economy on Air Anglosphere—and no one seemed fazed by the orthodox Jews bowing and praying during the flight. Good omens, I thought.

TRAVEL

TO STAMP OR NOT TO STAMP

THE ISRAELI AUTHORITIES obviously understand the sensitivities about passports, as you can choose not to have yours stamped. I chose to have mine stamped, on the assumption that I could still enter countries that had diplomatic relations with Israel and wasn't interested in entering countries that didn't. Finding a *sharoot* (shuttle) to Jerusalem was easy. I shared mine with a lovely retired Canadian couple, who live half the year in Jerusalem and the other half in Toronto, and a nice young man from California. Our main topics of conversation were: a favourite of mine, Margaret Atwood, who'd recently been to Tel Aviv to receive an award; student politics in West Coast universities; and my itinerary, which generated polite and studious interest from the Canadian couple. More good omens, I thought.

The study tour—the first of its kind—had an interfaith focus. Advertising was sent to Australian interfaith councils and committees at the national and state

levels. No faiths were approached directly. Apart from one secular humanist, our group of thirty-five was half-Christian, half-Jewish; several Muslims considered coming but didn't come. Each tour member travelled independently to and from Israel. Once we had assembled in Jerusalem, we found the chief guides on the ground were a rabbi (originally from New York) and a professor (originally from Rhodesia) both from the Anita Saltz International Education Centre, a teaching arm of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. As Diaspora Jews who've committed their lives to modern Israel, they were simultaneously liberal, outward-looking and self-critical: or as much as they could be—pragmatically—without having a national death wish. They'd been approached to do this inaugural interfaith tour by Australians and were obviously feeling their way. I came to admire them and trust their instincts.

On our first night in Jerusalem, at a briefing session, one Christian muttered under his breath—but loud enough for me to hear—whether we'd only be told what “they” wanted us to hear. On the last morning in Jaffa, at a debriefing session, another Christian candidly asked whether there were things we hadn't been told about or shown. The perception of pro-Israeli spin wasn't the majority view, though, and from my perspective the tour was a credit to its conductors, especially as it was the first of its kind. The itinerary was carefully thought out—we were obviously in the hands of professional educators who understand the principles of andragogy (adult education)—and the tour unfolded in a logical if subliminal way.

Over eleven days we discovered for ourselves—each in his or her inductive way—something of the complex narrative of a prosperous, robust and self-critical democracy. Israel gets some things right and other things wrong but has one bottom line—national survival—which unites the political spectrum, left or right, secular or religious, against those who don't want it to survive. The truth of the local conflict between

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Israelis and Palestinians, which exists within a larger global conflict, isn't black and white. It doesn't help to see the Israelis as oppressors or the Palestinians as victims. Both sides have to work together for peace.

On the Israeli side, our chief guide-rabbi criticised the tendency of a nation "so creative and so inventive" (smart) to consistently respond to the conflict in "the narrowest and most self-destructive manner" (dumb). He wasn't saying the raid on the flotilla was wrong. He was saying the raid should have been managed in a more intelligent way, so it didn't become a public relations disaster. He believes Israel needs to become more innovative about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and more proactive in seeking solutions to it. The answers are in the Bible, which has a lot to teach Israelis about smart and dumb—about striking a balance between Jewish power and Jewish powerlessness. I believe the Bible's message isn't only for Israelis, though, as every tongue and tribe and nation swings between smart and dumb.

THE JEWS IN JERUSALEM

ARCHAEOLOGISTS CONTINUE TO make discoveries that create subliminal links between modern identities and ancient narratives, and it's interesting to see so many groups of students from Israel and the Diaspora touring the archaeological sites alongside non-Jewish pilgrims. We began in the oldest part of Jerusalem—the City of David—where we saw evidence of the First Temple Period (970–587 BC). Hezekiah's Tunnel (circa 700 BC) was a major project—to extend an older tunnel (circa 1800 BC) which channelled water from the Gihon Spring—to protect the city's water supply during times of siege. This important archaeological site is in an Arab neighbourhood—an interesting dynamic we didn't have time to explore—and what remains of the nearby Pool of Siloam is just below a neighbourhood mosque and next to a privately owned Arab orchard.

The recent excavations around the Second Temple—which Herod the Great extended not long before the birth of Jesus—are powerful reminders of what Christians and Jews share: the fact that Jesus existed wholly within Judaism, not apart from it. No one said so, but it seems to me these excavations—of incredible importance to both Christians and Jews—have been sponsored by Israel and wouldn't have been made, on the level they are being made, if the land surrounding the Temple was still under Jordanian control. Along the southern end of the western wall, below where the priests' staircase once existed, an ancient street has been excavated, and we can now see shops where pilgrims purchased sacrifices, kiosks where pilgrims exchanged foreign currencies for Temple shekels, and

pools where pilgrims took ritual baths.

This is the street along which Joseph and Mary may have bought that pair of turtledoves (or two young pigeons) to sacrifice at their son's presentation, and a money-changers' table has recently been discovered which may be similar to the one Jesus overturned not long before his death. A recently excavated and highly controversial tunnel—built under homes in the Palestinian quarter of the old city—allows people to walk under the full length of the western wall. This tunnel is a must-see, as it runs along the bedrock of the Temple and gives us a sense of what was involved in building it. The monumental staircase, where pilgrims entered and left the Temple, has been excavated along the southern wall. This is the one place we know for sure Jesus once walked. Nearly everywhere else he is said to have been is contested.

We went to the Mount of Olives, where Roman soldiers camped during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Mount became a traditional place for lamenting the Temple's destruction, as it's higher than and has panoramic views of the Temple site. Prominent Jews have been buried on the Mount for four thousand years. During the nineteen years of Jordanian rule (1948 to 1967) burials were halted and massive vandalism of graves took place. I found out later that, in violation of the Israel-Jordan Armistice Agreement, King Hussein permitted construction of the Intercontinental Hotel at the summit, together with a road that cut through the cemetery and destroyed hundreds and perhaps thousands of graves, many from the First Temple Period. To add insult to injury, the PLO held the first conference of the Palestine National Council at the hotel in 1964. Restoration work began after the Six-Day War in 1967 and the cemetery has been re-opened for burials.

Our morning visit to the Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, was very moving. Our local guide was understated, sensitive, and slightly tongue-in-cheek, in that we only had a limited time to spend at the museum and he promised his tour wouldn't interfere with our lunch. There appears to be healthy debate over the role that remembering the Holocaust should play in constructing modern Israeli identity—and the appropriateness of the museum's design as an architectural metaphor—but surely the price of liberty revolves around remembering the past as well as moving into the future, and to me the building is impressive and appropriate.

Our afternoon visit to Mount Herzl—Israel's national cemetery for fallen soldiers, political leaders, and prominent Zionist figures—was more compelling than I thought it would be. Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, is buried at the top of the hill, not far from the graves of three prime ministers—Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin—and several presidents. Other leaders chose to be buried elsewhere; Ben Gurion

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at a kibbutz in the Negev desert, Begin at the Mount of Olives, and Weizmann at his estate in Rehovot. I was particularly moved by a recently dedicated monument commemorating the more than 4000 Ethiopian Jews who died in the Sudan while attempting to reach Israel. Our chief guide-professor was excellent in explaining the sensitivities of this memorial, since Ethiopian Jews have a different sense of narrative and history than the Ashkenazim or Sephardim or Mizrachim—or any other sub-group of Jews within Israel—and their identity within Israel needs to be honoured in a culturally appropriate way.

While in Jerusalem we had dinner with Dr Debbie Weissman, President of the International Council of Christians and Jews, and member of the Inter-Religious Coordinating Council of Israel. Dr Weissman is an academic and interfaith advocate who believes Jerusalem is a safe place and the city needs to market itself to advertise that fact. It worries her that Jerusalem is in decline, though, as more people leave for other urban centres. More attention needs to be paid to improving transport, providing affordable housing, relieving urban blight, and reducing corruption. Also, in her experience, women married to men from the more extreme ends of the religious spectrum—such as some Orthodox Jewish sects—shoulder a higher psychosocial and socio-economic burden, since their husbands are often dysfunctional, unproductive and abusive, and their families suffer as a result. That said, the issues facing Jerusalem are economic, not religious, since most of the population is secular, and improved infrastructure and productivity will increase the tax base, which will have flow-on effect.

On the Israeli–Palestinian conflict generally, Dr Weissman emphasises peace and the need for a two-state solution. She feels these can be achieved within the frameworks of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Religion isn't the problem—and can be part of the solution—as each religion contains the resources to promote openness. An overwhelming majority of Jewish settlers in the West Bank are there for economic reasons: they have housing they couldn't afford in Israel; they have a lifestyle they couldn't have in Israel. If these settlers were offered compensation, most of them would leave, and the few that refused to leave need to work out ways to live harmoniously within a Palestinian state, without coercion from Israel, just as Arabs need to find a way to live harmoniously within Israel, without coercion from a Palestinian state. On the issue of Jerusalem specifically, both Israelis and Palestinians need to find more constructive ways of

sharing the city.

Our chief guide-rabbi led us in Bible studies and experiential reflections such as “Walking Jerusalem Through the Psalms”. On the first Friday evening we attended Sabbath services at Kol Haneshema, an inclusive Progressive Reform congregation, and on Saturday we attended services at Har-El Synagogue, Israel's pioneer Progressive Reform congregation. Later in the tour we found out—more or less by accident—that the World Union for Progressive Judaism is fairly new in Israel, and there was a fair amount of bureaucratic and political opposition to its establishment in Tel Aviv, but our guides never drew attention to that fact.

THE CHRISTIANS IN JERUSALEM

THE CHRISTIANS ON the tour were an even mixture of Anglican, Catholic, Uniting Church, and Seventh-Day Adventist. On returning from Saturday morning services at Har-El Synagogue—and after hearing a lunchtime address from the iconic Rabbi Apple, formerly of Sydney's Great Synagogue, now living in Jerusalem—our chief guide-rabbi brought up the issue of Christian worship.

The answers are in the Bible, which has a lot to teach Israelis about smart and dumb—about striking a balance between Jewish power and Jewish powerlessness.

What would the group like to consider? What was possible? Perhaps a Catholic Mass tomorrow? No, boomed one Christian, in a voice that would have done a drill sergeant proud. After that, the subject of Christian worship was dropped as too hard for the rest of the tour, which tells us more about the tour's Christian pilgrims than the tour's Jewish organisers. True, the organisers could have anticipated this issue better—perhaps by simply scheduling a free morning on Sunday and providing participants with a list of denominational options—but I don't see why they should have to second-guess intra-

Christian sensitivities when they have enough on their hands second-guessing intra-Jewish sensitivities. Apart from that, the Christians could at least have made some attempt at projecting a positive corporate identity.

Our local guide for Christian Jerusalem was a Jewish archaeologist who publishes extensively on Middle Eastern archaeology. He took us around many of the Christian sites, which fall into two broad groups: those discovered and promoted as part of Constantine's mother Empress Helena's pioneering mission to sacralise the Holy Land in the fourth century, and those established and maintained as part of the extensive Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land which began in the thirteenth century. The important thing about these sites is they exist because of guesswork and devotion;

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you visit them to deepen your faith; you shouldn't expect historical accuracy.

To give one example, we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, within the walls of the old city, venerated by many Christians as the place where Jesus was crucified and buried and where relics of the true cross are supposedly held. This was where the hermeneutic of suspicion of our post-Enlightenment group became most evident, since the mindset of the Christian members of the group was as different from the spiritual zeal of Empress Helena—or indeed the non-Australian pilgrims visiting the church—as it's possible to be. The well-known shambolic politics of administering this church were obviously not consonant with Australian ideas of good management and common sense.

That evening Dr Petra Heldt, who obtained her doctorate in Patristics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—and is an ordained Lutheran minister from Germany, as well as Executive Secretary of the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity of Israel—gave us helpful insights. She said the administrative arrangements for the church may appear shambolic but actually work well within their sensitive context. The longer she remains in Jerusalem the more she appreciates this church, and she suggested we avoid judging the Christian sites by modern Australian standards.

Dr Heldt went on to provide us with background on what is happening to Christians in the Middle East, who find it difficult to be Christian in an increasingly Islamic environment. Already a minority, Christians are leaving the Middle East in droves. Those who remain are doing it tough: socially, economically and religiously. She gave one example to illustrate the point: a self-funding Christian school for girls in the West Bank educates a predominantly Muslim population which uses the school as a means to an end but is insensitive to the school's right to represent its Christian values.

Dr Heldt told us the Catholic Church is currently investigating the problem local Christians face. The Synod of Bishops is holding a Special Assembly for the Middle East in October 2010. The Synod has issued a working document, *Instrumentum laboris*, on which her Fraternity had been invited to comment, and to which her Fraternity had recommended culturally appropriate changes. The working document will be discussed at the Special Assembly, which has two objectives: to confirm and strengthen the faithful in regions with established diocesan structures and episcopal oversight; to foster ecclesial communion among the faithful in regions (rural or remote) without established diocesan structures and episcopal oversight. The Synod has been asked to describe the present situation in the Middle East, analyse its positive and negative

aspects, and provide the faithful with a clear vision for their continued existence in a predominantly Muslim society—whether Arab, Turkish, or Iranian—or in a predominantly Jewish society.

According to the working document, the faithful are relying on the Catholic Church to give them precise guidelines on how to rediscover their mission, so they can continue to bear testimony where they were born, and where they presently live, in countries where there's social and political development and—unfortunately—conflict and instability. The working document makes three recommendations: the faithful should remain where they are; the faithful should get to know their Muslim and Jewish neighbours well so they can collaborate with them for the good of society; and the faithful should strengthen their bonds with local Orthodox and Protestant communities.

Christians in the group who identify as liberal found Dr Heldt's observations conservative—whatever that means in this context—probably because what she said challenged their understanding of what's happening in the Middle East. I'm not sure, though, how a female Lutheran minister can be thought conservative simply for speaking the truth as she sees it—for telling us what's obviously happening in a place where she's lived and worked for over twenty years—since surely her knowledge is more intimate than ours. Dr Heldt didn't mention the fact—but because she didn't one of our chief guides, the professor, did—that she'd been a victim in a suicide bombing and received medical treatment for a year, in and out of hospital. But finding that out didn't melt any butter in liberal Christian mouths.

THE MUSLIMS IN JERUSALEM

WE HAD A local Muslim guide for our tour of the Temple Mount (its Hebrew name), or Mount Moriah (its Muslim name), in Jerusalem's old city. According to Judaism, this is where God chose the Divine Presence to rest. This is where the world expanded into its present form. This is where God gathered the dust (*adamah*) and created the first human (*adam*). This is where the First Temple was built by Solomon in 957 BC and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. This is where the Second Temple was built—the foundation being laid by Zerubbabel in 516 BC—was expanded by Herod the Great, and was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. This is the holiest site in Judaism, towards which Jews turn during prayer. Since the Divine Presence is still present on the Mount, many Jews won't walk on it to avoid unintentionally entering where the Holy of Holies once stood, and because the ark and the tablets may still be buried in one of the Mount's underground vaults.

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Mount Moriah is one of the holiest sites in Islam, revered as the place of Muhammad's ascent to heaven. After the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 637 AD, the Umayyad Caliphate commissioned the construction of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock on the site. The Dome was completed in 692 AD, making it one of the oldest Islamic structures in the world after the Kaabah in Mecca. The al-Aqsa Mosque rests on the far southern side of the Mount facing Mecca. The Dome of the Rock currently sits in the middle of the Mount.

This is one of the most contested religious sites in the world. Although controlled by Israel since 1967, both Israel and the Palestinian Authority claim sovereignty over the site, which remains a major focal point of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; however, Israel has turned over management of the site to a local Islamic council (or *waqf*) and, in an attempt to keep the status quo, Israel enforces a controversial ban on prayer by non-Muslim visitors. Put another way, the Israelis are going out of their way to accommodate Muslim sensibilities and suppress the minority Jewish view that a Third Temple be built on the Mount.

Our guide was circumspect about explaining all this to the group and we had to pump him for information. I saw our chief guide-rabbi slip a word in his ear and wonder whether he was being asked to be more candid. This was, after all, an interfaith study tour.

While we were walking along the Via Dolorosa, in the Muslim quarter of the old city, our guide stopped in front of an old building. He was hoping we could visit a home on the upper floor but he hadn't actually made plans for us to do so. It was the home of a Sufi friend of his, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari, head of the local Uzbeki Community, co-director of the Jerusalem Peacemakers, and founding member of a group of religious leaders known as the Abrahamic Reunion. The Sheikh is a unique spiritual leader whose vocation is promoting peace, harmony and unity in Jerusalem, in the Middle East, and in the world.

As our guide hadn't made any arrangements, he was expecting our group of thirty-seven—we thirty-five pilgrims, our chief guide-rabbi, plus himself—would just drop in. Evidently that's allowed as part of Middle Eastern hospitality. There was a hitch, though, which one of the boisterous hawkers on the street told us about. The Sheikh had just died, quite suddenly, at the age of sixty-one. Our guide was very sad, and we waited in the street while he went upstairs to pay his respects to the Sheikh's widow. When he came back downstairs he said the widow wanted all of us to come

upstairs anyway, even though she was in mourning, as she was adamant about continuing her husband's ministry of peace and reconciliation. So we went upstairs, all thirty-seven of us. It wasn't a long visit, about half an hour. Most of us sat on chairs and lounges, while a few stood, as her son served each of us Turkish coffee and fresh dates. It was a moving experience for us—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—receiving hospitality from this widow and her son.

Opposite the Bukhari home stands the Convent of the Sisters of Zion, an order with an interfaith apostolate, who run a well-known retreat house and centre for sabbaticals and continuing education. Beneath the convent there are significant archaeological remains, including an extensive area of Roman paving—part of two second-century forums within Aelia Capitolina,

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the Roman city Hadrian built after Jerusalem was destroyed. Beneath the paving there's a large cistern, originally built by the Hasmoneans, the existence of which is mentioned by Josephus. Our guide had made no plans for us to visit the Sisters either, but we knocked on the door and were welcomed by the Superior—an Australian—who invited us all up to the roof for a chat about the Order's apostolate. It was amazing, really, in this city of religious flash-points, for an interfaith group of thirty-seven to be wandering around knocking on doors.

We went to Mount Scopus, a high point in east Jerusalem, and looked out towards the west. In the foreground, a Bedouin was crossing a hot and arid field on a donkey. In the background, a highway was snaking around hills towards the West Bank; there were suburbs and settlements, some Jewish, some Arab; there was the security fence, built to prevent suicide bombers and terrorists from entering Israel.

While we pursued the conversation this view afforded, we discovered our Muslim guide is an Israeli citizen. Would he become a citizen in a new Palestinian state if he could? No, he said, they are too corrupt over there, and there's a future here for him and his family, not to mention excellent medical care. Has he experienced discrimination for being an Arab? Yes, he said, pointing to the summit, to a campus of the Hebrew University, where he got his degree. When he entered the campus one day, a security guard saw he was an Arab and treated him badly. What did he do? He immediately went to the vice-chancellor and complained. What did the vice-chancellor do? He immediately apologised and sacked the security guard. Israel, you see, is a democracy: the only democracy in the Middle East.

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NAZARETH AND GALILEE

AFTER SIX DAYS of exploring Jerusalem from three monotheistic angles, we travelled north to Nazareth and Galilee. Our local guide was the Jewish archaeologist.

In Jesus's day, Nazareth was barely a hamlet. Today it's a city known as "the Arab capital of Israel" because most of the population are Arab citizens of Israel. Until the British Mandate (1922 to 1948), the majority were Christian but now most are Muslim. While the two communities get along, generally, there's sporadic conflict. Muslim activists periodically march through the city, in shows of strength meant to intimidate Christians, and they tried to build a mosque adjacent to the Basilica of the Annunciation which the authorities were finally forced to stop.

The basilica is beautiful and modern. It's on the site where many believe Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus. Its walls are covered with several large mosaics of the Mother and Child, each representing a different race or nation. Justin O'Brien was commissioned to design Australia's mosaic, which represents the Southern Hemisphere. We visited the Church of St Joseph, the traditional location of his workshop, but we don't know whether he was really a carpenter. Our archaeologist guide has some interesting theories about what Joseph did make with his hands, though, and he probably sold whatever he made in a nearby town to support his family.

Apart from the Temple in Jerusalem, Galilee was one of the highlights of the tour for many in our group, as it's a felicitous combination of biblical attestation, convincing archaeology, and post-Enlightenment sensibility. In other words, there was no sign of Empress Helena there. We saw the ruins of the local synagogue in Capernaum, from the fourth or fifth century AD, and beneath these foundations we saw the foundations of an earlier synagogue from the first century AD, perhaps the one mentioned in the Gospels. This is the locality where Jesus once lived, where the apostles Peter, Andrew, James, and John came from, as well as the tax collector Matthew. This is where Jesus taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath, healed a man with an unclean spirit, healed a fever in Peter's mother-in-law, and where a centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant. Our archaeologist guide gave us several reasons why Jesus did so much in this locality; for one thing, as it was out of the way, Jesus was comparatively free here.

Near the synagogue in Capernaum there's a house said to be Peter's. Whether this is true or not, the house was probably used by the early Christians as a meeting place. In the late twentieth century, the Franciscans built a wonderfully sensitive octagonal glass church, which floats above the house, and in the middle of the

church there's a large glass observation area that looks down into it. The church has panoramic views across the sea, and on the other side to the Golan Heights (and the ancient Decapolis), which adds to the spiritual feel of the place. We dispersed for private reflection. The archaeologist guide approached me and asked whether I'd like to gather the group for some kind of prayer—by then he was obviously perplexed as to why this apparently ecumenical group had no desire to pray in Christian holy places—but I said no. It was too hard and, anyway, everyone appeared to be happy doing their own thing.

Not far from Capernaum, on the shore of Galilee, is the Mount of Beatitudes, which since the fourth century has been identified as the place where the loaves and fishes were multiplied, where Peter was given his primacy, and where the Sermon on the Mount was delivered. We don't know whether this hill by the shore—with its natural amphitheatre—was where these things actually occurred, but they occurred in this general locality, and from here you can see virtually all the places where Jesus lived and ministered. The archaeologist guide tried again, suggesting if we didn't want to pray here perhaps someone would at least volunteer to read from the beatitudes. And someone finally did. How delicious, I thought, a solicitous Jew coaxing divided and ambivalent Christians to listen to Jesus's message near where it was first delivered.

TEL AVIV AND JAFFA

TEL AVIV IS a build-now-plan-later city which never stops and is an extraordinary contrast to Jerusalem. We arrived a couple of days before the Gay Pride Parade, which cheekily promotes itself as the biggest in the Middle East. (The media estimated 250,000 participated this year.) We visited Trumpeldor Cemetery, the Diaspora Museum, and the Hall where Israel's Declaration of Independence was signed on May 14, 1948.

Some in the group were perturbed by the guide at Independence Hall, whose nationalist sensibilities were more passionate than usual in the fortnight following the flotilla. I found him appealing though—he loves Australia and has lived in Sydney—and I don't see why guides at Israeli national monuments should be forced to wear black armbands, or be required to have degrees in international diplomacy, to appease judgmental Australians. We were shown the suicide bombing sites, but only in passing, as it wasn't the intention of the tour guides to dwell on this issue.

Dinner on the waterfront boardwalk—directly under a civilian and air force flight path—was a reminder of how young and vibrant the city is. A big surprise, discovered during a free afternoon, was the Art & Craft

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Fair on Nachalat Benjamin Street, which is much classier and better value than any equivalent Paddington Market-type affair in Australia: the cafes there were excellent and a wonderful quartet of (perhaps unemployed, perhaps unemployable) Russian immigrants played classical music at the entrance. Tel Aviv may not be planned but has a lot to offer.

Jaffa is the city from which Tel Aviv grew just over a century ago. They blend into each other but have distinct characters. We got some sense of Jaffa's unique history on two excellent tours, one called "Give us our Daily Bread", the other focused on old Jaffa; both tours provided glimpses of Palestine before Zionism shifted the balance of power from Arab to Jew. Jaffa is still a poor sister—and is still overlooked by planning authorities—but there are signs of renewal as individuals discover what Jaffa has to offer. This is where you go to listen to the spirits of the displaced.

On Friday evening a rabbinic student led the first Sabbath service at our guesthouse. She said a few words beforehand, during which she admitted—as an aside—that tradition rather than faith underpinned her vocation to the rabbinate. Although an aside, the observation intrigued me, and it led to a fruitful private exchange with the chief guide-rabbi over breakfast the next morning. The idea that tradition is more important than faith may startle some Christians—especially from the Reformed churches—but the idea needs to be properly understood so it isn't misunderstood.

Here, near the end of the tour, we finally began having interfaith dialogue. Saturday morning we attended services at Beit Daniel Synagogue, which included a bar mitzvah. It was a cultural event, the guide explained, as the boy's family weren't members of the congregation and might never enter its doors again. Gosh, just like most baptisms in Australia.

PERSPECTIVES AND ANALYSIS

ON THE LAST day we had a debriefing session. As this was the first time the Saltz Centre had led an interfaith tour, the chief guides wanted us to reflect on what was good about it and where it might be improved. The feedback was mostly positive, although some dissenting voices believed we hadn't sufficiently covered all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, hadn't heard enough of the Palestinian perspective, and hadn't been critical

enough of the Israeli perspective. Surely there are many perspectives on both sides, though, and the tour was never intended to achieve all that. What it did achieve was consistent with the principles of adult education: it avoided being pedagogical or deductive; it allowed each person the freedom to engage with what they saw and heard in their own way. The tour was meant to open our eyes and encourage us to do more research on our own.

If we want to hear more about the Palestinian perspective, we can go on a tour arranged by Palestinians or—perhaps the next best thing—Australia's National Council of Churches. I believe the Christians in the group overlooked some important things: this was an interfaith tour, not a United Nations fact-finding mission; we weren't appointed or elected representatives; we were a bunch of Australian Christians with opinions, who couldn't separate being Christian from being Australian, who were more prepared to see the splinters in other eyes and less prepared to see the planks in our own. We need to be more aware of both our national and inter-denominational dynamics—the defence mechanisms that protect our self-image, our misplaced sense of superiority, our tendency to patronise—especially when these are on public display. What was permissible fifty years ago is less permissible now. The twenty-first century demands better behaviour from us.

On the way home I spent several hours at Bangkok airport where I read an interesting article in the *Bangkok Post*. Evidently Saudi Arabia has worked out a way for Israeli planes to fly over its airspace—on their way east to Iran—without scrambling its defence responses. Apart from that, apparently there are more flotillas on their way to Gaza, and some day Hamas will again commit terror from the south, and some day Hezbollah will again commit terror from the north, and some day Islamic Jihad will again commit terror from the east, and Syria will continue to sponsor Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad, and otherwise do everything it can—behind the scenes—to promote all this terror against Israel. So the issues are complex, and the answers are still in the Bible, which has a lot to teach Israelis about smart and dumb, about striking a balance between Jewish power and Jewish powerlessness. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed is the name of the Lord. Amen and Alleluia.

Dr Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.