

Visit to Israel Reveals Many Viewpoints and Hospitality

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Special to India West

At the invitation of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), 12 of us from the Indian American community visited Israel for 8 days, met a host of Israeli officials, talked to a diverse group of people, including Palestinians, toured three different cities and came back with the first hand knowledge of this country steadily progressing despite many political hurdles.

This was perhaps the first time that an organized delegation comprised exclusively of Indo-Americans was invited to come to Israel. There were people in the delegation from diverse background, including several businessmen, leaders of the Indian American associations, professionals and two students, all selected by the AJC. Several of us were skeptical in the beginning of this visit thinking that we would be exposed to one sided view of the political conflict, but were pleasantly surprised by the special efforts made by AJC to expose us to variety of viewpoints. We not only met with the Jewish officials, but also met Arab Israeli and Indian Jewish leaders. We visited 3 synagogues, participated in a prayer ceremony and were hosed by Jewish Families for a Shabbat dinner. We visited towns inhabited largely by Arabs and toured two settlements of Jews migrated from Mumbai and Cochin areas of India.

We all gathered in New York on Sunday November 6, 2005, before departing for Israel. A brief session of Pre-Seminar orientation was conducted by Ambassador Aaron Jacob, Associate Director of the Office of Government and International Affairs for the American Jewish Committee. Jacob is a Jew of Indian Origin, who as child migrated to Israel from Mumbai. He told us that the Jews from India moved to Israel not as a result of any anti-Semitism, for there was none in India, but left India after the Israeli independence to be with people of their faith.

After a 9 hour of an overnight flight on an extremely crowded El Al plane, we landed in Tel Avive's Ben Gurion Airport on Monday. The airport completed earlier this year is one of the most modern airports and is at par with many airports in the United States. We reached Carlton Hotel located on beautiful seashores at 2:00 p.m. and were given less than 2 hours to shower and get ready.

MEETING WITH INDIAN AMBASSADOR

At 4 p.m., we left the hotel for a brief sightseeing of the city. We were escorted to Jaffa an old city of Israel with many small houses occupied by artists. The city had small streets paved with stones. After touring the city we reached the Embassy of India where we were greeted by Indian Ambassador Arun Kumar Singh. He offered us cookies, nuts and tea and was very gracious in receiving us. Singh who originally hails from the State of Bihar briefed us on the excellent relations between India and the Israel. He boastfully said that the trade between the two countries has increased to \$2 billion in just one year. He told us about the 100,000 Jews of Indian origin living in Israel, that we would soon be visiting them in their settlement. Singh expressed concern about the new generation of these Jews for not keeping in touch with their roots. He said he was trying to raise funds to pay for the visit of these youngsters to India, in order to expose them to their roots. "There was never any Anti-Semitism in India and the older

generation has fond memories of India,” reminded Ambassador Singh who was kind enough to invite us for dinner next day at his lovely home. Located in the posh area of Tel Aviv, the residence of the Ambassador was spacious and well decorated with a swimming pool in the backyard. There were several visiting people from India as well Israeli officials at the gathering. The food served at the dinner was both elaborate and sumptuous.

On the first night in Tel Aviv, we were treated with a typical Jewish dinner with several courses. Amir Oren, a member of the editorial board of *HaArtz* newspaper apprised us about the Israeli politics. He told us that in Israel, no party has ever won the absolute majority in the parliament. We have had a coalition government for a long time and each government has to cater the wishes its coalition partners. “It is the only Democracy in Middle East,” said Oren. With respect to the substantial military aid from the United States, Oren said that the aid was not in cash. The aid is in the format of military equipment that America wants Israel to purchase, often at inflated price.

Next day early in the morning, we went to visit the Independence Hall, the site of the signing of Israel’s declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948. A group of Jewish leaders led by David Ben Gurion declared the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel. The surrounding Arab States rejected the formation of Israel and armies of six Arab nations attacked the State of Israel. Over the next 15 months of war, Israel captured an additional 26% of the mandate territory west of the Jordan River and annexed it to the new State. Most of the Arab population fled or were expelled by Israeli during the war. The continuing conflict between Israel and the Arabs persists to this day. The site has been converted into simple museum.

From the Independence Hall, we went to the Embassy of the United States and met the Deputy Chief of Mission, Gene Cretz. The American Embassy was the only place throughout our stay in Israel that no food was served to us. Every where we went we were treated with the great hospitality of the Jewish people. Ambassador Cretz briefed us about the strong ties between the United States and Israel and how US was committed to protect the State of Israel.

Back to the hotel for lunch, we were treated with a power point presentation on Israeli economy by Vered Dar, the Chief Strategist at Psagot-Ofek Investment House. She gave us very impressive statistics about the progress made by this 57 year old country. Israel has a higher life expectancy (79.3 years) than the United States (77.7 years). The country has 78% of the population is Jewish and 18% is Arab. The GDP was \$129 billion with a 3.9% growth rate. Israel has a technologically advanced market economy. It depends on imports of crude oil, grains, raw material and military equipment. Cut diamonds, high technology equipment and agricultural products are leading exports.

Following the talk on economy, Dr. Eran Lerman, Director of the American Jewish Committee’s Israel/Middle East Office talked about the Israel and its Strategic Environment. He gave us the historical perspective of Israel leading to the present day problems facing Israel.

VISIT WITH INDIAN JEWS

On Wednesday morning, we started our journey to Southern part of Israel. On our way, we stopped at the RAD BioMed, a hi-tech Incubator in Ramat Gan. This was the place where people with a great idea come to develop that concept into a practical use. It was small place

with few labs, but a source of many significant discoveries. Idan Tamir, a young CEO and President of the institute briefed us on how they specialize in promoting life sciences start up companies.

From the Incubator, we traveled to visit an Immigration and Absorption Center in Ashkelon and met with the representatives from Jewish Agency for Israel and with a bunch of students, 18-29 year old, recently arrived from Russia. Young Jews from all over the world come to places like this and are oriented to Israeli life and are taught the Hebrew language. Leaving behind their loved ones, these youngsters come to Israel to live. It was an impressive facility with many young Jews committed to make Israel their home.

In the evening, we were taken to meet with Jews who migrated from the Mumbai, India. These people looked like us, but spoke fluent Hebrew. Known as the Ben Israel of India, these are the only Jews who did not experience any Anti-Semitism. They lived in harmony with their Indian neighbors for two thousand years freely practicing Judaism. They migrated from India after 1948. We visited their synagogue, which clearly showed the influence of their Indian heritage. The Indian Jewish leaders took us to an Indian Restaurant in Ramle and treated us to a Marathi dinner with Mango Lassi and Pakoras. Many of these people struggled a lot in the beginning in this new land. Some people conceded that they felt miserable leaving a good life in India for an uncertain future in Israel. Now, they appeared to have assimilated in the Israeli society, and yet living separately from the main stream Jews.

We also visited next day the Moshav Nevatim Museum, established by Indian Jews migrated from the Cochin area in Southern India. They have prepared a short film of their life in India and their migration to Israel. They have put together the artifacts of their Indian connection in a small but impressive museum.

DEVELOPMENT OF NEGEV

Avishay Braverman, the president of Ben Gurion University of Negev was our host when we visited him on Thursday morning. A classmate of Mantek Singh Ahluwalia, the chairman of the planning Commission in India, Braverman has transformed this University. Under his leadership, the University tripled its student population, opened an academic center for Bedouin culture and is planning to establish the National Institute for Biotechnology Research and Development. Braverman was formerly at the World Bank and spoke of his fond memories of Indian colleagues. The University is located in the middle of a desert which has been beautifully developed by the efforts of Braverman.

From the University, we went to a town bordering the Gaza Strip recently disengaged unilaterally by Israel. This was the town subjected to daily rocket coming across the border. One could see in the distance the Gaza strip, a home of two million Palestinians. The population of Palestinians was rising rapidly, and one reason why Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza strip is perhaps that the Jews were afraid of losing their Jewish plurality in Israel. It was also a big drain on the Israeli economy.

ARAB-ISRAELI COMMUNITY

On our way to Jerusalem, we stopped in Abu Ghosh, a city where the majority of population is Arabs. We met with Issa Jaber, Director of the Education Department of the Abu Ghosh Local Council and other Arab Leaders. Speaking in fluent English, these Arab leaders told us that they want to live in peace with their Jewish neighbors nearby. Their efforts are directed at bringing peace between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. They were highly critical of the Arab Leaders like Yasser Arafat. Showing their great hospitality with drinks and Cake, the Arab leaders said that they prohibited from serving in the army and with no service in the army, they were shut out of some plum jobs in Israel. They did not think they were treated at par with their Jews citizens. They praised the Judiciary of Israel for voicing their concern. "We have at least one place where our grievances can be heard," said Jaber.

We also met on Sunday with representatives from the Palestinian Civil Society. Dr. Nazmi Jubeh, Co-Director of Riwaq-Center for Architectural Conservation in Ramallah, and Hannah Siniora, Co-CEO of the Israeli Palestinian Center for Research and Information. These people briefed us on the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. They were critical of both sides for lack of progress. They emotionally described the miserable conditions under which the millions of Palestinian Refugees were living in camps. They had no answer to a question why the Arab States have failed in taking care of these people. There was somewhat heated discussion between the Palestinian leaders and our Jewish Guide who became emotional hearing the criticism of Israel.

It was very interesting to hear the viewpoints of both Israeli and Palestinians. We were able to speak with the common Palestinians on the streets of Jerusalem, who were not afraid to speak their mind. Although they were critical of certain ways the Israeli government was behaving, they all enjoyed the freedom of speech in the country.

Visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial (museum) was both moving and memorable. It brought to life the darkest hours of the Jewish history when an estimated 6 million Jews, including 1.5 million children were butchered. Walking through the dark gray cemented walls and looking at the portraits of innocent children on the wall not being aware of the gruesome fate awaiting them and pictures of the emaciated bodies of men and women in concentration camps just before they were buried alive brought tears in many eyes. It was difficult to comprehend that men could be so cruel to their fellow human beings. No satisfactory answer was put forth why the holocaust happened.

FLOATING IN THE DEAD SEA

After listening to serious discussions for several days, we got the opportunity to have some fun. The trip to the Dead Sea was perhaps the highlight of our visit to Israel. Wearing comfortable clothes, we started our journey on Saturday towards Dead Sea. After we toured Masada and the remains of King Herod's desert fortress, we reached the Kalia Beach on the Dead Sea, a favorite tourist attraction in Israel. The water is 35% salt and with high density of salt, no one can drown in the Sea. When one enters the water, one just floats. It is a great enjoyment to swim in the water, provided one can keep the water away from eyes. This body of water is called Dead Sea, for no life can sustain the high concentration of salt. Virtually everyone in the group enjoyed floating in the Dead Sea.

Tour of the Old City of Jerusalem and visit to the Great Wall where Jews pray every Saturday was also striking. Here within stone throwing distance, the holy places of three major religions are located. Jews have their holiest temple, the Christian have a place where Jesus was tortured and Muslims have their holy Mosque. There cannot be more spiritual place in the world than this site. We prayed with the Jews and Christians within minutes of our visit to this place.

Another memorable aspect of this trip was our visit to Yadidia Synagogue on Sabbath evening. The proceedings reminded of the way the Sikhs pray in their Gurdwaras by singing loudly the sacred hymns. The Difference was the Jews sing it with the accompaniment of musical instruments. It was indeed a very peaceful atmosphere even for some of who are agnostics. Following the service, we were divided into groups 2 or three and were hosted a typical Jewish Dinner by a family. When we met after the dinner, no one will stop praising the hospitality of their hosts. All of the host families went out of their way to please the strange visitors.

LAST DAY IN ISRAEL

By the last day in Israel, the members of our group were pretty much exhausted after sleeping late every night, but were still enthusiastic to make the best of this trip. We were hosted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at a lunch. There, we met Amos Nadai, Deputy Director General of Asia and the Pacific, the man in charge of affairs with India. He spoke in glowing terms the good relations between Israel and India. He said that as the two vibrant Democracies in the world, they are natural partners. They are friends not because of their common enemy, but because of their common interests. He praised the Indian government for sending excellent Ambassadors to Israel and predicted that this relationship will reach new heights with the passage of time. Nadai expressed some concern about the lack of reaction of India when Iran made a statement regarding annihilating Israel. "The entire world condemned Iran for speaking in those terms," said Nadai, "but India Kept its silence and made a remark, although very mild, only in response to a reporter's question." He also said that visits by the high officials from India to Israel have slowed down after the change of government in India. However, he hastened to add that there has not been any impact on the relationship between the two countries.

Before departing for airport, we heard Dr. Asher Susser, the Director and a Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and were surprised when he said the American involvement in Iraq has made Israel less safe than before. Iraq was a buffer between Israel and Iran and this country (Israel) was now exposed to the danger from Iran. When told that the perception in the United States was we are fighting this Iraq War for the safety of Israel, Susser disagreed with this notion. It was wrong on the part of America to attack Iraq, insisted the Professor. The war has increased the possibility of greater not less terrorism in the world. He also indicated that the unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip was a step in favor of the Israeli security, despite protests from the rightwing Israelis. The two million Arabs living in Gaza Strip could really pose a threat to Israel. He predicted that the peace will soon come to the region.

When we reached the airport to catch a 1:00 a.m. Flight to New York, we learned with great dismay that our entire party was bumped off due to overbooking by the El Al airline. Many of us panicked, for we had connecting flights from New York to our destinations. Our leader of the delegation, Ellen Israelson who has been constantly mothering us throughout the trip and always kept us on time was furious. She approached the General Manager of the airlines and threatened

to cancel all AJC trips, if we did not get seats on this plane. After hours of waiting, we were all, except Israelson and two other members of our delegation, were able to board the flight. Israelson, like a good mother, gave up her seat, so that we can get to our destinations on time. She came to the United States on the next flight in morning.

It was a universal opinion in the group that the trip was very well planned; the accommodation at Tel Aviv, Ashkelon and Jerusalem was excellent; the food served to us was voluminous and delicious; and the speakers who addressed us were all very knowledgeable. Our guide with 17 years of experience of leading tour groups, Ofer Ashkenazi, was out of this world. His knowledge about the world affairs and his passion for Israel really impressed all of us.

The delegation was comprised of Harry Anand (New York, NY), Ani Agnihotri (Atlanta, GA), Rajen Anand (Washington, DC), Niraj Baxi (San Jose, CA), Vic Chauhan (Washington, DC), Kavita Chhibber (Atlanta, GA), Rick Desai (Atlanta, GA), Ro Khanna (San Francisco, CA), Sampat Shivangi (Jackson, MS), Prashant Sinha (Washington, DC), Mandakini Sud (Washington, DC) and Krystal Kaul (Washington, DC).