

“Visiting Israel in 2024” by Roy Barber



June 9, 2024

Third Sunday after Pentecost

BEGINNING

Easy Entry. Nice Flight. Great lunch!

Chile and cold slaw, and muffins and strawberry shortcake!!

My seat mate, Solit a Jewish young man from Turkey began to talk with me about the search to find himself in the Philippines with tiny children who live in a cemetery. He climbs in and out of. these graves with these children and his older brother. They are both heading for Washington DC to learn better English to help transcend the failure in their future they foresee.

The English teacher moves over to my seat. And tells me how much she enjoys the Mississippi River Bridge in Memphis. She tells me she spent 24 years working in a detention center with high school kids who were ashamed to announce their disabilities. They were very timid to acclaim their difference.. I said I thought it was ironic that we are whispering in the place so no one will hear about how ashamed we are of people who are different.

When I get on the plane in Paris for Tel Aviv everyone has dark eyes, curly as my mother would say. They look like the Jewish kids at East High in Memphis, or White

Station.. Or it could be Parents Day at Camp Ramapo in the Catskills. I am beginning to feel more relaxed. Someone had Margery's eyes. Someone had Betsy's hair. I sat with an older Jewish Couple who were going to visit their daughter in Tel Aviv. They asked me what I remembered about Tel Aviv from 30 years ago I said I remember the white Bauhaus architecture, Dizengoff Square, and the warm, open days.

Tums out that the Abraham Hostel is a kind of big dream house. Lots of porches and open spaces including a roof terrace with bright wildflowers, lots of colors and smells. My room is full of light I have a full bathroom and everything works!! It is dusk and a lot of the guests go up on the roof to paint trying

to match the sky with the breathtaking sea.

I had several long talks with men my age or younger about the War. Today. was probably the most moving one-I walked down to the beach and saw what a bustling developed citynTel Aviv had become. A. VERY prosperous world class city. This is a little South Beach. Everyone is BUFF very tanned except new migrants from USA. You can find anything you want at Tel Aviv beach

So many felafel shops so many gelato shops, so many cafes filled with chipper yuppies in casual chic.

I stopped for a coffee in in a crowded cafe and a young man invited me to sit down. He was talking about Dune.and how much he liked the movie with Timothy Chalomet, He asked if I were a writer. I said I was here to write a new musical. We realized we both were named ROY. or ROYmi in Hebrew. He said his family were all people of the Left. He googled me and found several musicals I had written. His grandmother takes him to see musical shows He told me how hopeful he had been when OSLO happened—maybe Gaza could tum into Cancun or paradise. I described the process of writing I use. He began to cry Gaza is still a shit hole..He too took the hostage taking and the murders very seriously. They walk into your house and stab you,rape your sister,kill you all. They are killers we can't trust them. I am going to the army with my brothers. We have to kill al the people who want to kill us.

Friends of my family have regularly gone into Gaza for years to get children and bring them to treatment in Israel.

I said the body count of these children in Gaza is way too high. it proves American student positions and protests.

You don't understand how important United States values are to us. You have always been our caretaker family for these same values.

Which ones?

'Freedom of Speech, Human Rights for everyone.

Are you and your brothers wanting to learn how to commit genocide? Only if they force us to.

You have always been my spiritual family. my artistic family. When I see Jewish people caught in these terrible dilemmas it breaks my heart. It frightens me.

We shake hands and walk out. Shabat Shalom...

I continue to walk into Dizengoff Square. The posters of the hostages are everywhere. A folk singer is at the center of the park. He smiles at me. I could be walking in Washington Square on a lazy summer's afternoon.1965.

I went back to the Hostel and took some notes then climbed back up to the roof terrace for another gorgeous flaming sunset. I recognized a gentleman sitting on the roof and sat down beside him. What an evening, I said. He asks if I want a drink- I say a ginger ale. When he returned he said, I take it you are an American. Where are you from? Washington DC. I said. And you? I just came in from Columbus Ohio today. He comes from a deeply religious family in Philadelphia. Temple most days and nights. He also plays guitar and mandolin with a Klezmer band. We talked about the special community of musicians sharing solos in rounds. He also does music with seniors and children at the Hebrew Home. He sang Puff the Magic Dragon, and The Wheels on the Bus go round and round. I clapped and I joined him. "Music is the best

Unifier." Much better than politics or religion. He told me he didn't meet his first Christian until he was in the 6th grade. She called me Christ killer and pulled a knife. Wow- so much for religion. And Politics.How old are you,Roy, 72, the same as me. You look younger than 72. What brings you here? I was here 30 years ago.

How about you? He is based with 3 army troops doing volunteer

civillian work for them. How do you feel about Netanyahu”

He’s a clever player. He keeps the Jews united. .Your Trump is pretty clever too. Some people think he’s a monster.

These days the world is full of monsters. Maybe we are lucky in our leaders.

AT THE TEL AVIV ART GALLERY

The Israeli take on the October 7 Assault is very much like 9/11. In the US. Photos of the hostages are everywhere. The Tel Aviv art museum was masked in black. The special exhibit of Impressionist paintings has been locked away because of the War. The Hostage Shrine is right at the museum. Each hostage. has his or her own exhibit. In New York at Ground Zero the tone was more somber, mute. People were passing out hand made signs. “They attacked our best”.

The signs shouted.

Palestinian mothers who had lost children in this war and marched with them. Sinai and I agreed that Empathy is everything. It makes us human. It helps us survive.

The rally was at dusk, and a diverse group of young and older folk came. There might have been 500 people there. There were two Russians who were friendly and translated the chants from Hebrew to Russian to English.

I saw a Dad carrying his toddler in his arms. I told him I had carried April when she was young to many rallies. He said she was already a “bear.”

I saw a Mom pushing her stroller on this warm evening. I said “you are doing a good thing”. She laughed and said “We are trying.”

The stickers we wore had 2 State solution in Hebrew and Stop the Slaughter Now ,also in Hebrew. The rhythm of the chants

were very familiar so I danced to what felt like "The People United Shall Not Be Defeated" for several hours. The actual rally was at the art museum where Hostage Families held vigils. Then when the speeches started I caught the train for Jerusalem I would take the bus tomorrow morning to Bethlehem. from Jerusalem.

There were checkpoints on the way to Bethlehem. It rained fiercely and the hills were foggy. I was to meet my host:: Daoud Nasser and his family at the Manger Church. There were no tourists in Bethlehem because of the war and apparently no work for anyone. Some older children brought me into one of the Holy Family shops and I bought some curios. No one else was there.

The rain poured hard—I finally saw Dauod's van and I climbed in. Dauod's younger brother Bashir is director of the Museum of the People of Palestine in DC. Seeker's Church is a supporter.

I met Dauod, his wife, his sister, his Dad, and his older aunt. They explained that it would take

us a longer time than usual to get to the farm today because the Settlers had cut off one of the

roads

Four Principles of Tent of Nations

1. We will not be victims. We will not leave.

2. No one can force us to hate them.

3 We have no guns.

4. We work from Christian values. We want Justice.

As the sky began to clear- I could see how high we were.and how beautiful this land was. Dauod told me that his family bought this land in 1915 during the Ottoman Empire. They also held it during the British Mandate and after various Arab/Israel wars. Since 1991 the Settlers had contested their ownership 32 times. They had burned down some olive trees and threatened the family at times in the past. It is a beautiful farm and they grow olives, figs, rosemary, thyme, grapes and various herbs. They have invited volunteers from other countries to come and help them. They believe that foreign visitors give them some support and protection. In summer they invite young people from one of the largest refugee camps in the West Bank located within Bethlehem, Daheisha to come up for several weeks of workshops. led by visiting teachers. They do music, arts, and drama. They have done Romeo and Juliet in Palestine and Palestine on the Moon. At the end of each camp summer they have a performance and invite all their families to come up the hills. Dauod's family has permanent Title to this land, for as long as they can keep it.

I spent the next 3 hours climbing through the dramatic emotional artistry on display All were very strong reminders of a team that can never seem to win. A dark God watches over but never intervenes. These children fall, burn and die in humiliating ways, often alone..

Two artists showed a different vision. One was named Secco's life work from Germany as a theater artist and in Tel Aviv where he did Oedipus and Shakespere with Tyrone Guthrie at the helm, In the 1980's he and his wife moved back to Germany and worked with the last sector of Deviant artists

The second body of work was shown by a woman artist who raised two children in a little town in Galilee. When her art drove her out she began a series with a transboy in a variety of

character poses. dressed like her, She and her lover Anna made love and ,metaphorically went to the house in Africa. where a new messiah or new vision may be born,

I left the Museum just as the police were entering the area to announce a memorial to the lost hostages. Each night their families gathered.

I got a Jerusalem Post today. Not one photo or story of a Gaza child, or families in Gaza Independence Day is Tuesday (NABKA- the disaster as Palestinians call it.)

Lots of stories about the hostage victims, and over and over the brave IDF, and Holocaust stories, so many, new ones, And how disgusting Biden is to pull the weapons away from Israel to stop another slaughter in Rafah. I threw out the Post. No wonder my friend Ellen Siegel was so furious with her Jewish Homeland and never stopped trying to make it better. I kept thinking about Ellen as I walked down to meet Sinai Peter for coffee. Sinai Peter was one of the founders of Y'sh Gvul, an organization founded in the late 80's for people who refused to fight in the Occupied Territories. Refusing to fight in Israel is an act of treason and all men and women have a 3 year draft commitment to fight from age 24-27. Orthodox men and women are removed from the requirement and Israeli Arabs are not required to serve. Consequently you see lots of young people carrying rifles in the streets of Tel Aviv. Ellen told me about Y'sh G"Vul and I interviewed a soldier in New York who was a member and made him a major character in my musical play, Children With STones. Sinai Peter is an internationally acclaimed writer and actor and I saw two of his moving plays at theaters in Washington. He. also wrote a musical play about the Intifada in 1990 and it was produced in Los Angeles. We acknowledged that we chose similar subjects to write about. He asked what my thoughts were now. I said I had heard about a project called Tent of Nations in a farm in the hills overlooking Bethlehem. He gave me the name of Rabbi Ascherman who also supported Palestinians in those hills. He says no one

writes good news about Israel these days...It was an interesting idea. He is also an acting teacher and had a class across the street to teach. He had to go back to Haifa after his class, but told me about a Rally Against the War in a Tel Aviv park that evening. He was very friendly and generous and helpful. I told him I had gone to a Stop the Occupation march in 1987 and met Efrat Spegle who had lost her son in the Beirut War in early 1980. She could not learn what had happened to her son. He had been killed in a car crash Or how long the soldiers would be in Lebanon, when her dead son would be home. . She felt her government had lied to her as the US government lied to us about Vietnam. Her sense of betrayal led her to join other Jewish and

Daoud and his wife remind me of Steven and Mary Ann Carpenter. His wife asked me if I would like to work for awhile. She brought me a rake.As I raked up leaves for a toilet compost I thought about my Mother the farm girl who would have done the same thing for troubled children, and would have loved to be just above Bethlehem.

I found this whole story thrilling. And surprisingly familiar. For the past 30 summers I had done arts camps with neglected children and teens, Two stories Daoud and his wife told spoke very clearly to me.

One of the workshops they do is calle :I want to _____ . The kids were asked to fill in the blank and put their answer in a hat. One child wrote I WANT TO DIE... Daoud asked which child had written that. Eventually the girl raised her hand. She wanted to die because her father was dead and she had never known him and if she died they could be together. Daoud embraced the young girl and gave a special assignment. to her. He asked her to draw pictures of all the summer camp activities. Who the people were in each group, what activity everyone was doing. Who was happy? Who was sad? The girl shared with everyone, and got more excited as she talked. Taking an art activity to move you from your own

preoccupying sadness to share with others can be helpful, Daoud suggested.

The next example was a happier one. A young boy walked to the top of the hill and said I have to cover my eyes. i have never seen so much sky before! He had spent his life inside

UNRAH camps and barbed wire and walls. So much space was unimaginable and incredibly beautiful!!

Art frees kids imaginations. If they can see. It can be.

Daoud checked me into the Peace Inn in Bethlehem. As was often the case I needed to get some money from an ATM, and just as often I was more than somewhat lost. The streets of Bethlehem are white brick and winding and when I asked with gestures speaking neither Arabic nor Hebrew i frequently went the wrong way.. I saw an ATM at the top of the hill and I meandered there followed by 10 and 11 year olds on Bicycles. They saw me draw money and they demanded it It was a dark street, They said "we have nothing" I believed them and said take it. This whole event took less than a minute. Some older kids saw it and chased these kids who because they were riding bikes were must faster and quickly disappeared.

The older kids were quite worried about me and got a taxi to take me to where I was staying.

I woke the next day heading for Jerusalem with enough sheckles for the bus. I realized this could have happened anywhere, It could have been so much worse. Both groups of people, Israelis and Palestiians have been abundantly gracious and careful with a nice old man who always seems a bit lost. Gratefully, Elese reassuringly wired more cash into my account.

I am staying in the Jerusalem Hotel, very beautiful,old, and very near the Damascus Gate. I decided to suspend my search for a working phone for today. I walked across the street to

the Garden Tomb. Supposedly the actual tomb of Jesus. It was discovered in 1867 very near the other Jewish graves, close by the public gates. I ran into some students from Capetown, black and colored and they invited me to sit and pray and sing with them. To join them in communion. Afterwards I walked with a young Asian man down to a look out point where we could clearly see a skull staring at both of us. Place of the skull is another word for Golgotha. Very public, very shaming. Very close to the street. Very humiliating to be nailed naked in such a public place. No place to hide. When I finally wandered down to the Garden Tomb it was very deep in the earth. As I stood beside it I said Thank You for saving all us drunks, helping us heal emotionally, physically and spiritually. Helping us to look into your light. To be able to see your light.

I roamed past the Dome of the Rock to the Wailing Wall, I kneeled and <lobbied singing April's version of the St. Francis Prayer. "lord make me an instrument of thy peace." It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

I slowly walked down the brightly lit Via Dolorosa. Taking comfort in the growing shadows.

When I walked into the lobby, the copy of Harretz was on the table. Milton Viorst, and Thomas Friedman wrote for this paper. Their thinking was better. They wrote better. The investigation of why Israel was so unprepared for this Ground war. They placed their faith in "smart bombs" They had no idea that Hamas would cross the fences and strike them up close, so brutally, so effortlessly, so face to face. Perhaps that explains some of the Israeli vanity. To overkill, to prevent them from ever coming back. It turns out that a lot of the tunnels were not Hamas shelters.

But each site seems to be bombed mindlessly.

I think about all the IDF soldiers who have been trained in

what must be called genocide. Was that their intention? They were led by Netanyahu flunkies who told him what he wanted to hear.

A Vietnam reckoning is being prepared. Old arrogant men taking the lives of their young who refuse to see what is happening. Kissinger, Cheney, Rumsfeld

The kitchen staff came in with a delicious piece of chocolate cake. This is because we love you!! And I responded And I love you right back!!

There are many war correspondents who are here and stay for 20 days and then they retrench and someone returns to replace them. A Sicilian correspondent named Lorenzo asks about my work I say I am exhausted! How about you? Well, the real war is in Gaza, But nobody can get in there.

How did you get close enough to describe it,

It's a desert war-gold, concrete, bush and sand. And baby bodies blown around. Do you ever stop seeing the burned bodies

I tell them I need to get to the beach ASAP How does your trip go?

Sinai Peter says nobody can write anything positive about Israel now. Tent of Nations is the most positive thing I've seen..I keep thinking about sneaking back into Bethlehem.Why?

Sounds like a clean project with a clear mission and minimal bullshit. The Settlers provide the drama

And the bull shit- But in this country that's what we got drama, soap opera and bullshit.

On this trip I have been staring at Mary Magdalene's Church. I can see it out the window. I watch it each night

All the colors start moving. the green, blue, red,

golden..Like our Christmas tree. Just those lights in the Old City

And the DOME-and the singing from the mosque swells in quarter tones- Allah be praised Jesus Lord Father Abraham

Thank you for just this day/ Thank you for just this day If we imagine it – It can be