



The Wexner Foundation Electronic Beit Midrash Parashat Vayakhel

Seeing the Country Through New Eyes

By Joe Stone

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For the past 27 years a group of friends have taken a 10-day bicycle trip all around the US and Europe. This past year several of us decided to make Israel our destination.

Having been to Israel many times, two of us organized the trip and decided to make it a mountain biking trip. We kept it to the northern and western parts of the country where there are many Jewish National Fund (JNF) trails. The trip was fantastic! I have been part of a JNF sponsored ride in the south from Jerusalem to Eliat, so this trip rounded out my experience.

However the truly amazing part of the trip was taking two non-Jews and making sure they experienced the whole country in the best way possible.

To make this happen I insisted that they arrive several days early so that we could tour the Old City of Jerusalem and help them understand its importance.

One tour, of the Jewish Quarter, was led by a guide who lives in the West Bank and who was due to join us for the rest of the week on our bike ride. He is an American by birth who moved to Israel many years ago. Having been to the Old City many times, I was sure I had seen and heard it all. But this guide took us on the roof tops, where he opened a new world to us. My non-Jewish friends were intrigued by the Wall and the area around it. I promised them we would go back at sunset in order to really understand its importance.

When we finished we hiked back to our hotel without our guide and changed for Shabbat. As we entered the Old City at the start of Shabbat, the crowds were moving quickly towards the Wall and we joined them. I took them closer and both asked for time to say their own prayers. It was truly an ecumenical spiritual experience.

The next day we were met by a guide I hired and did not know. I just took a chance finding him on the internet. It turned out that he was a great choice. We again left early and toured the rest of the Old City. We walked for over 8 hours in and out of every gate that is accessible and even up to the Mount of Olives visiting all the churches on the way. Again I was moved by the differences in this tour as it hit on all the major non-Jewish sights in and around the Old City. Not the typical sights that one sees on 'missions.' We went to the Austrian Hospice (www.austrianhospice.com) and had some wonderful



homemade strudel and coffee. The building was an oasis and took you back to the mid 1800s, when it was built and furnished by the Austrian government as a hospital. In between, we visited the Stations of the Cross and discussed the importance of each one of them. One of my friends was not sure if he had to pray the Rosary at each stop or when he was finished. Later we ate lunch at an Arabic restaurant that served only humus and salads.

The tour was fantastic and made me realize that seeing the Old City and later much of the rest of the county through non-Jewish eyes changed my perspective and broadened my horizons. It was not the same old-same old touring of the obligatory sights with an all-Jewish group. I recommend taking friends and seeing the country in a totally different light.

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