

Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) Reflections

Bruce Sutchar
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Even though I am Jewish to the core, and my brother lived on a kibbutz in Israel, and my parents visited Israel, and I have cousins who have been living there for 40 years, for some reason, I never had the desire to visit. Maybe it was because the only Israelis who I had ever met in America were incredibly arrogant, but I think there was a more spiritual reason. After I joined the Unification Church, I was working for a carpet cleaning business, and the owner of the home where we were working had just come back from Israel. When I saw pictures of Gethsemane, the Sea of Galilee, Golgotha and other historic Christian shrines, my heart began to desire to visit the Holy Land.

I graduated with an M.Div. from UTS in 1985. I had already earned a Masters degree in Psychology and fully expected to write my divinity thesis on some aspect of psychology, however God led me to write my thesis on “Jewish, Christian and Unification thought.”

Rev Michael Jenkins and I worked together day and night in Chicago for twenty years and he was always scolding me for being “too Jewish.”



Bruce whatshisname

When the MEPI conferences began, I was (almost) first in line with my passport in one hand and my yarmulke in the other. Some of our members have since complained that the 25 MEPI conferences have not accomplished enough. Considering what has been going on in the Middle East for the last 2000 years, I don't think that we could realistically expect that MEPI would bring an instant peace. I have been on 5 MEPI trips (including that very first one where we all signed the proclamation along with the Chief Rabbi and Archbishop Stallings) and I have had many profound experiences.



The Garden of Gethesemane

The first time, I had a very deep experience *as a Jew*. Later I also had profound experiences as a *Christian* and then as a *Unificationist*. Sometimes, it was confusing. I had special experiences with the Christian shrines: the Sea of Galilee; Gethsemane; beggars field where Judas was buried (we buried a cross at sunrise); Mt Nebo, looking across the Jordan at Israel as Moses had, thousands of years earlier – an inter-faith service on top of the mountain – like no other I have ever experienced in my life; Amman, Jordan- a week after 2 hotels were bombed, where the crowds welcomed us (while everyone else was running away from Jordan) and cheered us in ways that I have never experienced. Meeting Dr. Gloria

Wright from Atlanta and reading the Sermon on the Mount standing where Jesus had given it 2000 years earlier, Dr. Wright has become my true sister ever since; becoming blood brothers with the 3 Israelis who work with us- Shuki and Shosahana Ben Ami, and Eliezar Glaubach, a Soviet gulag survivor who with his wife Rachael was chosen to light a candle during the 50th anniversary of Yad Vachem; visiting where my ancestors had marched around Jericho 7 times holding the Torah; accompanying an Egyptian Christian professor who was allowed to speak at the tomb of Jesus; commemorating 9-11 in Jerusalem; making friends with our tour guide, a Palestinian Christian who was born in Colombia and had returned to Jerusalem to help bring unity; taking one of our Jewish unificationist sisters to the Wailing Wall – where she later had one of the deepest experiences of her life; going to the Red Sea with Susan Fefferman- we stopped at Masada, then traveled on to the kibbutz where my cousins have lived for 40 years; visiting the port city of Haifa, known as the Peace City, because the Jews and Muslims work side by side and don't argue theology; celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, in Haifa where we ate apples and honey with the Chief Rabbi and his wife (who came to Israel from Harlem in 1948).



Chief Rabbi of Haifa

I know that these experiences are all highly personal, but they have been so significant in shaping my life. Also, every time that I was in Israel there was a bombing—including our sunrise mission to bury the cross in the beggars field. People were killed not far from us. We have to keep going, because nothing else is bringing peace.

Second generation members of the Unification Movement have accompanied us (Joshua Schanker for one, Maria Fiala from Alaska, another, two best friends of my sons and daughters). We brought the President of Costa Rica and the President of Indonesia to call for peace. I met Iranian Jews (a new experience for me). I listened as the vice mayor of Jerusalem repented to the Arabs for not learning their language.

Susan Fefferman, Senator Donzella James and I did home church in a Palestinian Village – what a deep experience – the way we were welcomed in and treated was so beautiful. We came unannounced and left with prayer beads and a bottle of hand pressed olive oil -given in love. Try knocking on a neighbor's door most anywhere in modern day America and see if they invite you in.



Senator Donzella James seated next to Phillip Schanker

Father gathered African-American ministers, Palestinian Christians and Muslims, Israelis (mostly women), the Chief Rabbi of Israel, and so many others—who are good people and believe that peace is somehow possible -if we communicate first. Father matched us to spouses from enemy nations and that has worked, why not this? The Palestinians deeply respect and understand the suffering that their African-American brothers and sisters have gone through, therefore they listen during the conference sessions.

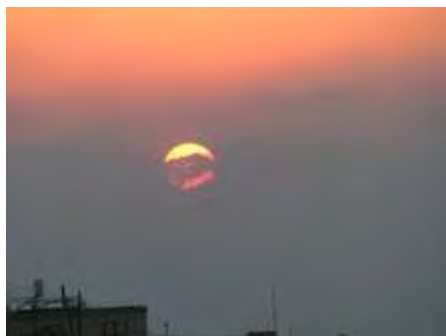
MEPI leaders met with President Arafat (who gave a beautiful gift to Father), President Shimon Peres, and several members of the Knesset (Israel's parliament). We began to build relationship with the Palestinian religious leaders and as a result were able to bring Israelis directly from the Western Wall to Al Aksah Mosque (something that no Israeli had ever experienced before). We held press conferences with the President of Indonesia, and called for peace, friendship and brotherhood, throughout every corner of Jerusalem. We developed a deep relationship with the Druze Community. We made friends with many

Muslims who now reside in America. Most of all we caused Jews to listen to Muslims and Christians and vice versa—as never before. During the interfaith service on top of Mt Nebo (which you can only access from Jordan) The guy who was “too Jewish,” felt like he had transcended all denominations. Bishop Jesse Edwards preached, Rev Phillip Shanker read the bible, as Christians, Jews, Arabs, Israelis, African-Americans, Caucasians, Native Americans and Hispanics went beyond all boundaries to truly experience being one family of man. We had not come as tourists, we came as peace-makers. One spiritualist even testified that our presence there at that time afforded the spiritual protection necessary for our True Parents. Personally, I felt that this was Father’s final condition—that by making the effort to bring peace to the Middle East, God could bring peace to Korea.



Jerusalem

There is much much more, but suffice it to say that, albeit we did not accomplish enough, is it not better to light one candle than to curse the darkness? I believe that we gave hope to many (both inside of and outside of our movement). You have to believe that God is pulling for us and that he knows that eventually, in the not so distant future, even greater miracles will occur.



Sunset in Israel