

Israeli Youth Conduct a Religious Youth Service Project

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Jerusalem, Israel - Towards the end of 2013, an international RYS project was held in Jerusalem. The Dec. 18-22 program was conducted by Koriel Ben Zvi and Liel Shmueli, leaders of RYS, Israel, with the dedicated support of the senior advisers, Mrs. Rosa Shmueli and Mrs. Miri Kamar.

The program started with the welcoming of 42 participants from five continents and 15 nations. Those young, high-spirited leaders came to the Holy Land in order to study about the complicated geopolitical reality in Israel, wishing to understand better the hearts of the locals - both Israelis and Palestinians.

As a mixed group of young people from different backgrounds, the interaction among the group members had created a special opportunity to get to know the other: other languages, religions and cultures. Warm new friendships were created and went beyond the national and religious differences.

Interfaith

The first day was dedicated to the subject of interfaith. By visiting the Old City and exploring the holy sites of three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we could experience closely the various traditions. In the visit of magnificent Dome of the Rock, which is one of the three holiest places for Muslims in the world, we learnt from Mr. Tawfiq Shaar about prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who ascended to heaven from that spot.

Walking through the "Via Dolorosa," we traced the suffering path where Jesus had to go before his crucifixion and ended in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre marking the place where Jesus was crucified and buried. Some people had an emotional experience hearing about Jesus' last moments and his attitude under those circumstances.

The tour concluded in the Jewish quarter of the Old City. After visiting the Western Wall, Rabbi Reuben Haskin took the group to a yeshiva, – a traditional institute for Jewish religious studies. Inspiring the group with his passionate way of explanation, Rabbi Reuben shared with them about the unique way Jewish people practice their belief in God. They truly believe the essence comes through studying the word of God, and this is why they invest a lot of time and energy in religious studies.

Interfaith and leadership

On the second day, we held two special panels at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The expert panelists discussed the geopolitical situation in the Middle East as well as the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. The participants were very enthusiastic and wanted to learn and absorb the interesting information they have received. They asked the experts important and challenging questions.

The panels were moderated and coordinated by Mrs. Adi Sasaki, the director of UPF's Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum, and by Dr. Nurit Hirschfeld, the director of UPF's Jerusalem Interfaith Forum.

The day continued with a visit to a sight with beautiful view of the Old City from one of the mountains surrounding it. In the evening, we experienced together the Jewish Sabbath. To welcome the Sabbath, we went to pray at a famous Reform synagogue. Even though the whole prayer service was held in Hebrew, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming.

Leadership and service

the next day (Saturday) was focusing on a service project, which was coordinated and dedicatedly handled by Mrs. Miri Kamar, secretary general of UPF-Israel. We went to an Arab village named Isawie, which is located on the east side of Jerusalem. We did a service project at an important school which provides special education for children with mental and other disabilities. The director and several staff members of the place welcomed us very warmly and gave us a tour of the place. We were amazed to see the various and creative ways they are using in order to help the children.

After the tour, we were divided into small groups and went to spend some time with the children. The interaction with the kids was amazing; through the experience we could learn to accept others regardless of their backgrounds or differences.

The second part of the day was held in Beit Hanina University (in an Arab town near Jerusalem), where we had a panel discussion about "Democratic Values in Middle Eastern Tribal Society." A woman lawyer gave us her perspective on Palestine as an independent country. and Dr. Mantsur gave an introduction to

the history of the Middle East.

Later on, we met Arab students. We had a question-and-answer session with them through which we could learn about their perspectives and feelings regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Special concluding events

On Saturday evening, we participated in a celebration of the tenth anniversary of UPS's Middle East Peace Initiative. The event took place at a famous hotel where the group met many important Ambassadors for Peace from all over the world. The young members mingled with the participants and were happy to converse with them. Later in the program, our group was called up to stage to share our vision and thoughts. The older people were very happy and inspired to hear the courageous young leaders.

Early on morning of the final day (Sunday), we went to the Old City and took part in a walk through its streets, in the tradition of the peace marches of UPF's MEPI program. Some of the participants had moving experiences in the march.

Next, we went to Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust museum of Israel, and had a chance to ask our tour guide questions about the Holocaust. The visit was followed by an opportunity to learn about the experiences of a former soldier of the Israeli Defense Forces who was serving in the army at times of wars in the southern part of Israel. She shared about the difficulties of commanding soldiers during that time. Having been raised to value peace throughout her life, it challenging for her to find herself in a situation of war.

The program ended with the presentation of graduation certificates by international and local UPF and RYS leaders.

Participant reflections

"I have made some long lasting friendships and am glad to have spent time with RYS and the Youth UPF, who made me feel very welcome and accepted even though I don't belong to any faith in particular. MEPI is doing great work and learning about the work they do was inspirational. This has left a warm feeling of support and hope for world peace the future."

"I am so very grateful for having been a part of this blessed journey, I still feel like this is all a dream ... a beautiful dream. The complete schedule was diverse, incorporating a vast array of activities, all very apt and relevant to the reason why we were on this trip. We achieved so very much in a matter of four days, and it feels quite unreal that we accomplished so much in such little time with such amazing results and outcomes. This trip, both the outward and inward journey, has left me feeling grateful, appreciative of what I have, hopeful for what is to come, and confident that I can make a difference in the lives of others. I was told various things by the participants, and each time I was spoken to, I felt the presence of God through their words, I felt that my being on this journey in Jerusalem is not a coincidence but intentionally planned by God. The beauty within every participant was both unique and special, and God answered every question, every hope, every desire I went with, through the spirit of the participants. Seeing Jerusalem for what it is now, and for what we all hope it shall emerge as, has taught me to be strong, courageous, faithful and positive. Viewing the struggles, the sadness and the upset amongst the faces of those who live in this county has allowed me to have hope and to acknowledge and be grateful for all that I have, but to also strive to help alleviate the challenges the Israelis and Palestinians encounter. I have returned from Jerusalem with a greater desire to be of assistance to others and the belief that I can make a positive difference in the world. This journey has been rewarding, beautiful, inspiring and unforgettable. The memories are priceless and shall be cherished forever."