

Friends and Family,

18 March 2023

I am now back in Israel and doing well. I needed to put in a little extra time for my first year after Aliyah so I will be eligible for a five year Israeli passport. I have won a few battles with the Israeli bureaucracy - I now have a one year Israeli passport which will expire in October. I also have made progress in getting an Israeli driver's license.

I'll be back in Florida by the beginning of June. In the meantime, my plan is making having fun in Israel a higher priority than defeating Israeli bureaucracies.

I arrived on February 1st, to find an Israel I had never seen before. Raining, very windy and cold (in the 30's Fahrenheit). I had brought clothes for cold weather, Boca Raton style. Instead of taking a taxi from the Yitzchak Navon Jerusalem train station, I stupidly decided to walk. Finally arriving at my apartment, I discovered that my clothes were soaked, my heat was not working and then I remembered the rest of my clothes were in storage. And the elevator was not working so I had to carry all my luggage up four flights of stairs. My Israeli blanket was a summer blanket and the temperature in my apartment was about 40 Fahrenheit. I spent the next five hours out in the elements, soaked to the bone and freezing, in search of a winter blanket or an electric blanket or an electrical heater (mostly in vain). At about 10pm my landlord asked my neighbor to come up and see if he could help me with my heat. And he got it working!

I spent February taking care of chores and exploring restaurants in Jerusalem. However, I found myself quite tired. I would sit or lay down and instantly and involuntarily I would be asleep. I would sleep for sixteen hours - sometimes more. Nancy phoned me once and I could not figure out what day it was or if it was nighttime or daytime. I guessed that it was something to do with mold and my heating system (Dr. Google confirmed that this was a possibility). I opened all the windows, turned off the heat and with the assist of a space heater I went back to my normal sleep cycle!

On March 3rd Nancy arrived for a six week visit and things immediately went from good to great. I took her to the new restaurants I discovered and she loved them (Israel has developed a reputation for good cuisine). She also discovered Israeli wine and approves of it. Nancy walked into a fancy jewelry shop near the King David Hotel. The store owner was a religious Jew and talked to us for a long time. He claimed that the opposite of darkness is not light, but happiness. Israel, for all its problems, is a happy nation. I was quite happy that Nancy walked out of the jewelry store with her (and my) bank accounts intact.

We enjoyed Purim (which is quite wild in Jerusalem) and on the 9th of March we rented a car and started on a three week car trip to see all of Israel. My not so secret goal is get Nancy to fall in love with Israel (I think it is working).

Before leaving Jerusalem, Nancy and I had a delicious Shabbat Dinner with my second cousin Hannah along with her parents, my cousin Emet and wife Ann. Emet and Ann were here for a visit. It was a true pleasure to catch up with them all.

The first two days of my trip with Nancy were spent at the Dead Sea, hiking to Nahal David Falls in Ein Gedi on our way to our hotel. Our hotel had a spa for residents with a pool filled from the Dead Sea. I was nice at the end of the day to float in Dead Sea water and than wash it off in a hot tub. The next day we went to Masada where Jewish zealots attempted to find refuge from the Roman Legions that caused the diaspora. Masada is a mountain top where King Herod built one of his palaces. It was intended as a “bug out” place, where he could flee his enemies if need be. Masada was completely the impregnable fortress Herod intended it to be, but one should never underestimate the power and determination of Roman Legions. The tragic history of Masada affects present day Israeli thinking and makes for both an amazing and emotional visit.

On the third day we headed for Mitzpe Ramon Crater, stopping for a hike in Ein Avdat National Park near Ben Gurion’s kibbutz (Israel’s first Prime Minister) kibbutz, Sde Boker. Ben Gurion and his wife are buried at Sde Boker with a gorgeous view of the desert he loved so much. The hike was adjacent to the grave site, up a canyon ending with a waterfall. Short and beautiful hike.

That night we spent in Mitzpe Ramon (the city on the rim of crater) learning about Israeli parking and searching for a spot. The hotel, like the one at the Dead Sea was lovely, but oddly did not have an elevator. We were on the 4th floor (since the ground floor is the 0th floor, in Israel the 4th floor is referred to the 3rd floor). We spent the next day hiking the rim of the crater, visiting the Mitzpe Ramon Visitor Center and the “Spice Quarter” of town (where the artist types have their galleries and live). As usual, our dinner was superb.

The next day we drove to Eilat, stopping for a hike in the crater and visiting Kibbutz Neot Smadar along with its great restaurant up the road. The kibbutz is very into art and very weird architecture. We arrived in Eilat in time for a fantastic dinner across from our hotel (they gave us so much food we enjoyed the extras for dinner the next night). The hotel we stayed turned out to be one of the nicest I have ever stayed in. It cost the same as other places we stayed at, but was a suite with a balcony overlooking the Red Sea and

deluxe hotel pool.

On the 15th we headed off to a tour of Wadi Rum (an incredible red desert where “Lawrence of Arabia”, “Star Wars” and many other movies have filmed) and to Petra, both in Jordan. Our group with Abraham Tours contained eight people and consisted of a very cold night in the Wadi Rum desert. Both Nancy and I felt it was one of the most amazing experiences of our life. I am so glad we took the trip. One of our tour mates who was a sexual therapist kept us entertained, but mostly terrified, with all her inappropriate questions, requests and behavior. The beauty of the desert speaks for itself (see photographs referred to at the end of this travel log). The day after Wadi Rum, we saw Petra, capital of the Nabataen kingdom and featured in “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”. Petra was also absolutely amazing - a worthy bucket in anyone’s bucket list of what to see while you are still alive. Mohammed, our Jordan tour guide, was fantastic. We returned late Thursday night to Eilat barely able to force our worn out bodies to walk, but with a sense of happiness and contentment.

The last time I was in Eilat was in 1997 and it is nothing like the sleepy town it used to be. It is now a modern, booming resort town with wonderful walking malls, great restaurants and lots to do. It is also a VAT free zone so this is where Israelis come for their shopping. We will enjoy Eilat for the next few days and then start our journey North.

Miss you all,
Marc

Friends and Family,

24 March 2023

On return to Eilat, we moved into the Neptune Eilat Hotel from the Aria Eilat Hotel, a large step down. Not that the Neptune wasn't very nice (it was), but we had gotten spoiled at the Aria. The battery to the rented car had gone dead (still don't know why) while we were away in Jordan so we spent part of the next day getting it recharged and the rest of the day doing laundry at the Abraham Hostel (quite a nice hostel). Other than that we spent our time exploring Eilat.

Eilat is Israel's resort town, sort of like Las Vegas, but without the sin. It has great beaches on the Red Sea, great hotels, restaurants, nightlife, lots of nature adventures nearby and great urban outside walking malls. Its nice weather attracts millions of domestic and international visitors each year. In Eilat and elsewhere in Israel, Nancy has been constantly observing that we are the oldest people wherever we go, be it shopping malls, restaurants, nature parks or anywhere else. Israeli demographics are young.

Leaving Eilat, we visited Red Canyon Park, a beautiful 35 minute drive from Eilat located next to the border fence with Egypt. The hike started off following a dry river bed whose banks looked like dirt with gravel and rocks embedded into them. On closer look the dirt was like cement and the rocks were quite firmly lodged inside. As we continued with our hike, the walls to the dry river bed got higher and became red sandstone. We had entered a red canyon. Following the red canyon, we had to scramble over rocks and at several places climb down sharp drops using ladders of metal rebar embedded in the rock. Fortunately we ran into a Birthright group that we immediately joined. Birthright is a non-profit Jewish American organization that sends (for free) Jews aged 18-26 on ten day heritage trips to become familiar with Israel. I suggested to Nancy that we try to blend into the Birthright group. Nancy had her doubts about our ability to blend in. They were very friendly, but several of them compared us to their grandparents. It was a fantastic hike and Nancy and I (and the Birthright kiddies) all had a great time.

That evening we ended up at Kibbutz Lotan where we spent two nights. Kibbutz Lotan was founded by the American Reform movement and besides being a successful kibbutz, it prides itself in its contributions to ecological living. They have built houses, benches and statues everywhere with bottles, cans and old tires stored permanently inside them. They built an "ecological village" where the "village" has community bathrooms and washing machines powered by bicycles. Nancy and I talked to a nice young woman who was staying in one of the eco village's straw and mud huts as part of an ecology course she was taking. She confessed to secretly peeing on the side of the hut in the middle of the night rather than taking the cold hike to the community bathroom. She

even justified her assault on Mother Earth by telling us how her pee is especially good for the soil. I am pretty sure she still exposes for others the virtue of housing without bathrooms. The members of the kibbutz live in much more conventional housing, as did Nancy and I for our two nights. Both Nancy and I like Kibbutz Lotan and its inhabitants a lot.

We spent the next day in nearby Timna Park which includes King Solomon's Pillars (though it is not clear if King Solomon ever had anything to do with them). The park is huge and is the site of numerous Egyptian copper mines from 1,200 BC (at that time copper was mankind's most advanced metal). There were smelting ovens and temples to the gods of mining. There are also the mines the Egyptian slaves mined. Nancy crawled into one, got lost, and, like a gopher, emerged from an opening smack in the middle of a restricted area. The park is among the most beautiful in Israel with many interesting geological formations.

The next day we drove to Haifa. Despite the fact that Israel is smack full of many sites and things to see, it is still a small country and the drive from the Kibbutz to Haifa was only about four hours long. Along the way, we stopped in Caesarea National Park consisting of an ancient Roman port built by King Herod. It was the most advanced Mediterranean port at its time. It was here that concrete, that can harden underwater, was first used. I have been here before, but now it has new and nice restaurants and shops, a great museum and amazing new archaeological excavations. I learned more about Herod's ancient Caesarea than I had in past trips - all of it very fascinating. Caesarea is both beautiful and amazing.

The next day we visited Ein Hod, an artist town South of Haifa. The town is quite beautiful and filled with sculpture and beautiful houses, views and landscapes. There are several nice galleries, but the Janco-Dada Museum was over priced.

Traveling a bit further South we visited Zikhron Ya'akov ("Jacob's Memorial"), a very cute town known for its wine and shops and overall beauty. The town was founded in 1882 by Baron Edmond James de Rothschild and named in honor of his father, James Mayer de Rothschild ("James" being derived from the Hebrew name Ya'akov, Jacob). In 1885 Rothschild helped to establish the first winery in Israel, the Carmel Winery, which is one of Israel's largest and best known wineries to this day. The remains of Baron Edmond de Rothschild were reinterred in Zikhron Ya'akov in 1954.

From Zikhron Ya'akov we continued South to Netanya for dinner with our friends Tova and Joel. As always, we had a very nice time with them. Netanya is beautiful seaside

town (actually now a city). Nancy and I arrived a little early so we had an hour or so to explore. We both enjoyed Netanya.

I am not super familiar with Haifa. We stayed in the upper city near the Louis Promenade. Both Nancy and I loved the great views of the lower city and harbor below along and the food in nearby restaurants. We liked this area greatly. Our greatest problem with Haifa is that our smartphones have trouble connecting to GPS. This is vital for using navigation apps like Goggle Maps, Waze and Moovit. As a result of this lack of GPS, a trip to Camel Beach took a half day of hiking down to the lower city, instead of using the Carmelit (an underground funicular railway) or a bus that went directly to Camel Beach. Fortunately, there was GPS in the lower city and we had no problem finding the proper bus back to our rented apartment. Haifa has a wonderful seaside promenade and we enjoyed walking and eating there.

Tomorrow we are going to visit Akko, a Crusader port and fortress. The next day we will arrive in Safed for four days from which we will explore the Galilee and the Golan Heights. Nancy and I are having a great time. More to come.

Marc

Akko was the Holy Land's most important seaport for much of history - it is among the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world. It has changed hands many times. Along the old port there is much evidence of when it belonged to the Greeks, Romans (and Byzantines), Crusaders (First and Second Crusader Kingdoms), the Muslims (Umayyads, Egyptians and later the Mamluks and the Ottomans) the Brits and the Jews. The city is a mixture of Jewish and Arab (both Muslim and Christian), Druze and those of the Baha'i religion. Nancy and I spent our time in the historic Old City where most tourists go and which is almost completely Arab. The historical places are owned by the National Parks and have excellent audio and written documentation of the sites. One feels the amazing history of the place. Things like the Ottomans repelling a siege of the city by Napoleon in 1799.

I find the Old City of Akko along with its port fascinating. It is amazing how much Crusader stuff is left - tunnels and Hospitaller Fortress and Citadel. The Crusaders were in the Holy Land for about as long as the United States has existed. They must have believed their reign here was forever, much as the Romans could not conceive of a world without Rome forever. One can easily argue that the Muslim Era of Akko continues to this day in the city shuk, in the Al-Jazzar Mosque and in the Old City itself.

When we got back to Haifa we saw protesters congregating for a march at the center of the Carmel Heights. I don't know how many protesters there were, but there were a lot. As far as I could tell the protesters came exclusively from the Ashkenazi Jewish Left, which had recently suffered major defeats in the recent elections. Most of the protesters appeared to be respectable, friendly, well educated people. The demonstration was well financed and very well organized with many wearing LGBTQ+ garb. Besides the stated objective of blocking the Judicial Reforms, many protesters demanded the overthrow the Netanyahu coalition. There were signs and banners (a few with the Palestinian flag on it) protesting the "occupation" of Judea, Samaria and East Jerusalem. Many protesters paraded under banner of the French Revolution, "Liberté, égalité, fraternité". A 100+ procession of women marched in perfectly matching handmaiden uniforms. Most of the signs and banners were in Hebrew and I could not read them. Some protesters had signs in English calling for foreign governments and leaders to apply external pressure on Israel. A few just called for more "mayhem". Israel is undergoing a long term cultural and political crisis much larger than the fight over judicial reform. As if Israel did not have enough problems to begin with.

The next day Nancy and I drove up to the Rosh HaNikra sea grottoes on the Lebanese

border. One takes a cable car to go from the top of the chalk sea cliff to the water level below. The sea grottoes are natural caves cut in the sea wall by wave action. I remember in 1971 jumping in the water from one of these caves and swimming out to open water. Those days are long gone for both Israel and me. It was quite beautiful and there was even a movie in an old British train tunnel explaining the history and geology of the place.

Afterwards we drove to Tsfat (often spelled Safed in English - its real name is צפת). Tsfat is about twenty miles north of the Kinneret (Israeli for the Sea of the Galilee). Being this is Spring in the Galilee, the drive was gorgeous. The winding road was one lane in each direction with no turn offs so we were not able to stop and take photographs. The beauty of the countryside was the equal of Umbria and Tuscany. Tsfat, located on top of a hill, is the highest city in the Galilee and has a long and interesting history. It is one of the Four Holy Cities of Judaism (the others being Jerusalem, Hevron and Tiberias). Tsfat was a center of Kabbalah and still is.

Arriving in Tsfat, we immediately discovered that despite being a relatively small city of 40,000, it is impossible to navigate without GPS. Located up high, the car's built-in Waze navigation often cut out so both Nancy and I had our Google Maps running on our smart-phones as backups (which was also prone to losing the GPS signal). Fortunately Waze and Google Maps agreed with each other most of the time. Our hotel was easy walking distance from the center of town. Our plan was to use Tsfat as base for exploring the Galilee and the Golan Heights along with spending time in Tsfat, itself.

Our first day trip was to Bet She'an National Park, south of the Kinneret. Bet She'an was the site of the largest among ten Roman Decapolis cities in the Southern Levant. In fact, it was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire. The city was mostly destroyed in the 749CE earthquake (Bet Sh'an is located in the Great Rift Valley extending up from Africa). The remains of the city were uncovered (and partial restored) by Israeli archaeologists after the founding of Israel. The full splendor of the Roman Empire is clearly on display. The baths, amphitheater (still in use) and the temple illustrate the luxury the Romans enjoyed.

We stopped on our way back to Tsfat for dinner in Tiberias. I remember Tiberias from 1971 as a cute, quiet town. It is anything but now, with crowded roads and large block buildings built before the time Israel cared much about architecture and city planning. It is worth seeing, but I am glad we chose to stay in Tsfat.

The next day we drove to Nimrod Fortress on a ridge on the Southern slopes of Mount

Hermon in the Golan Heights. Nimrod is described in Genesis as “a mighty hunter before the Lord” and was thought to have attempted to build the Tower of Babel. The fortress was first constructed in the Byzantine period. It was rebuilt by the Ayyubids at the time of the Sixth Crusade, with the new name of Qal’at al-Subeiba, to protect Damascus from the Crusaders. Later it was conquered and strengthened by the Mamluks. When the Crusaders were defeated in Akko, the fortress was no longer needed and later it was badly damaged by an earthquake in 1759. In the days of missiles, stealth aircraft and tanks, I don’t think the Israelis are thinking of repairing it, but it must have been very impressive in its day. It was built well and worth seeing.

Nancy and I had a very nice time in Tsfat itself. Tsfat is an ancient city whose Old City consists mostly of talented artists living alongside ultra-orthodox Jews. The Old City is extraordinarily gorgeous as I hope my photographs hint at. As Nancy is prone to do, she started a conversation with a young (about 25 years old) yeshiva student about what he is doing in Tsfat. He was new to being religious and despite disapproval from his grandparents, he felt his life was now on the correct path. It was quite an interesting conversation - thanks Nancy. The city has several Sephardic synagogues and each of them is a jewel. The majority of Jews in Israel are Sephardic Jews (Jews from the Middle East or Central Asia that the Israelis call Mizahi Jews). Nancy also loved the food she found in the Old City, so much that I caught her dancing a jig when she didn’t think I was paying attention. And both Nancy and I bought art in Tsfat. I love Tsfat.

We got up early our last day so we could visit Tzpori National Park, north of Nazareth, on your way back to Jerusalem. I am now thinking of replacing my tiled floor in Boca Raton with mosaics. Tzpori NP definitely has the best mosaics in Israel. Tzpori was mostly a Jewish village that became the capital of the Galilee under the Romans. The Jews did not join their fellow Jews in 68CE by rebelling against the Romans and instead accepted the rule of the Romans. These Jews later made important contributions to the present day Talmud.

Photographs from the entire three week trip can be at

<https://marcmehlman.smugmug.com/2023Israel/>

The photographs have now been edited in lightroom.

Arriving back to Jerusalem we found it stuck in a cold and rainy spell. Both Nancy and I enjoyed our three week trip. I immediately wanted to continue it. There is still more to see!

Marc