

My Visit to Israel

January 2001 Solidarity Mission

Part One

Eugene Barlaz

The Solidarity Mission really started at a briefing on January 4th, 2001. There were over 100 people at the briefing and over 160 people on the mission from the Boston Metro area. This mission was about bringing people to the land of Israel. At the briefing we were introduced to each other in small groups, where we talked about what we were feeling and why we were going. The mission came together that night and continued until we all came home safe and sound.

I have been to Israel many times before, the last being a 4-day solidarity mission in October 2000. Some people, including members of my own family, had asked if I was crazy, did I really want to go. They knew the answer. My parents went to Israel very soon after the Yom Kippur war ended -- they had set the stage for my desire for and understanding of Israel. The solidarity mission left two days after the U.S. government warned Americans not to go to Israel -- that was a sure invitation to draw me in. It left the day the rocks were thrown at settlers in Gilo -- that was all it took to convince me that I had to go, to be in Israel when it mattered most. I have always followed my instinct on what to do and when to do it. I had clients and friends in Israel that needed a visit, to know that I stood with them in good times and bad. It was my opportunity as a Jew, and as a member of the United Jewish Communities (UJC) [Young Leadership Cabinet](#) (YLC), to show my faith and my belief and go to Israel.

The January mission stood apart. In October, there were fewer than 30 people from around the country. In January, the mission was populated by over 960 people from around the US and Canada, over 160 people from Boston. This mission made a statement, bringing people from around North America to Israel, as friends, as tourists, as Jews.

On January 8th, 2001 we lifted off from Boston on the way to New York. [The Combined Jewish Philanthropies](#) (CJP) staff shepherded us through airline gates, onto busses, through baggage claim in New York, and to El Al, to begin our journey, to allow us to fulfill our destiny to be in Israel during her time of need. Ivy Finn, the chief shepherd who made all the arrangements, stayed in Boston. After having dotted the I's and crossed the T's on each of our itineraries, she now watched us depart in the capable hands of her colleagues. Our flight included over 400 passengers that were either part of our mission or part of the Birthright mission. [Birthright](#) is a program created by UJC to get the younger set, those under the age of 26, to Israel, to teach them what Israel is all about and hopefully start a love affair with her early in life.

Arrival in Tel Aviv about three hours late made Tuesday a shortened day, but it doesn't

matter. We have arrived in Israel, we are on the way to Jerusalem, our journey has officially begun. The mission is divided into three hotels, with most people from Boston staying at the King David. On Tuesday night we all get together at an air force base about an hour from Jerusalem. Our welcome to Israel included a buffet dinner in a hanger and a wonderful concert. The dinner allowed us to interact with Israeli Air force personnel and to socialize with the other people on the mission. The concert became an activity unto itself. The Boston group, one of the largest groups from any community on the trip, became an active participant in the Shlomi Shabbat concert as several people ended up on the stage dancing and almost everyone else from the trip formed a line and danced in circles through the crowd. As the music played, the feeling of being in Israel grew, the emotion mounted, the dream of a peaceful easy feeling of being in Eretz Israel came over us and made the beginning of the trip a night to remember.

Wednesday was the first day that I joined the Young Leadership contingent for the morning. We went to the Israeli Aliyah Village in Jerusalem where there are over 400 children from across the nation studying secular Judaism and learning what it means to be in a family. The village was settled over 30 years ago as a place where immigrant and at-risk children were placed in a home-away-from-home. Over the years the populations have changed from Soviet children to Ethiopian children to today's mix of Soviet, Ethiopian and Israeli at-risk children. Children that attend the schools in the village are sent home on weekends if there is a stable home to go to, otherwise they remain at the school year-round. There are dozens of after-school activities and trips around the country. We had the opportunity to interact with some of the kids that could speak English and hear what they had to say about the current events. With the exception of traveling to and from school, most of them were unaffected by recent events and were more interested in talking about their pasts and their future in a peaceful Israel. I had conversations with some of the older kids (high school age) and those kids largely hoped that co-existence was possible but they were afraid that all of the deaths of Israelis were too much to overcome.

Mission participants continued to visit other areas around town that afternoon. I started following my own itinerary that included a visit to Elron, a large corporation with many divisions operating both here and in Israel. The meeting I had with Elron Telesoft allowed me to interact with several Israeli business folk, do a little negotiating, and talk with people who were living within the confines of general strikes and closed borders on a daily basis. This provided me with a different view than that of other mission participants. I was on the trip primarily as a mission participant, and as a American Technion Society representative, but since my company has clients and business interests in Israel (my own form of economic development within the Holy land), I took several side trips that allowed interaction with the Israelis that do business in both Israel and Massachusetts.

The night took me on another journey -- this one had lasted 15 years and was due to end with a new beginning. It was 1986 and my fifth and final year in college at Rutgers University. Neil Cohen (now Natan Katan) and I were close friends, chabad-mates, Hillel activists, drinking buddies, but mostly two people whose lives were about to diverge for the next 15 years. Neil's dream was to move to Israel, enter the army, and fulfill his dream. Mine was to finally graduate and start on a career adventure. Now Natan is a family man

with two children and a wife and I am still seeking my besheret. We met back in Jerusalem, having not seen one another since 1986. Immediately recognizing one another in a hotel lobby crowd of over 200, we slipped away from the mission and to another side of town to have dinner, talk, and reconnect. Continuing a conversation that started over a decade before can only be done with certain people; Natan is one of the few people I know that I could do that with. We talked about his experiences in Israel, how the uprising has affected his life, his children's lives, and his career. We talked about the rocks that have been thrown at his car and the broken windshield that resulted with his family lying in the backseat. We talked about what it really feels like to live in Israel and how events affect daily life. One of the biggest daily effects is in the routes one takes between assignments -- you get a better understanding for where you are, where you are going, and how you are getting there. We talked for several hours as the time we spent separated was washed away and our friendship renewed.

Very early Thursday morning I was picked up by Joel Berkowitz, Director of the New England Office of the [American Technion Society](#), and Bill Marcus, one of the ATS lay volunteers. As a Technion representative on the mission, I joined Joel and Bill for a day at the Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa. Our purpose was twofold, to identify methods of reinforcing the Boston-Haifa connection and to hear about new projects being implemented at Technion. As a member of the ATS Year 2000 Young Leadership class, I am still learning about new ways that both Haifa and the Technion can be supported.

One of the interests of the Boston-Haifa partnership is that of assisting Ethiopian children with melting into Israeli society. We therefore spent the morning at the Mechina building. Mechina is a pre-university program that was created to allow students to re-learn their scientific and mathematical skills so that they can qualify for the Technion following their service in the army. In addition there are several programs within the Mechina program that are targeted at grade school and high school children that are in the at-risk category in the northern region of Israel. We visited and spoke with many of the participants in and teachers of these programs, including one Ethiopian student that had come to Israel in 1991 and a student that visited Boston's New Jewish High School last year. Teddy, the Ethiopian child, related how Technion was helping both his schooling and his socialization. To hear his story and how the program was helping made the trip to Technion worthwhile. That afternoon Joel and I visited several other offices and heard about the wonderful programs that are being implemented at Technion, many of which will benefit not only Israeli citizens and scientists, but Americans doing market research as well.

The second part of this series will cover the remainder of my trip in Haifa and the meaning and feelings that I had during the trip.

Eugene Barlaz lives in Brookline, where he is employed by Strategic Business Partners. He is a member of the [UJC Young Leadership Cabinet](#) and the local [CJP Young Leadership Division Executive Board](#). He is also very involved with the CJP Computer Group and is serving as the Computer Industry Group's Campaign Chair. He is single and tries to travel to Israel at least once a year. Eugene can be reached at gbarlaz@21stcenturyincubator.com. If you are interested in participating in a future Solidarity Mission to Israel, contact Ivy

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