



JEA HOLDS 66th ANNUAL CONFERENCE IN ISRAEL

The Jewish Educators Assembly, the professional organization of educators in the Conservative movement, just completed its 66th Annual Conference in Israel. (Name) _____ of _____ (Synagogue / Town) _____ was among those in attendance. The gathering brought together congregational school education directors, early childhood directors, bureau and agency personnel and family and informal educators from all across North America and Israel..

Israel presented a unique tableau from which to gain a better understanding of what Israelis face in their everyday lives, the remarkable accomplishments and technological achievements of the modern state and a look back at history – all presented through the lens of how do we take what we have seen and experienced home with us, presenting an honest picture of the modern state while imbuing a love of Israel. A number of the conference participants continued on to Prague on the way home, to learn about the Jewish community there, visit the synagogues of the old Jewish quarter and make a stop at the Terezin ghetto.

Our first four days in Israel were based in Be'er Sheva, the capitol of the Negev. There is incredible building and development taking place in the south, and we got to see it all firsthand. Our trip began with a visit to SodaStream, the Israeli start-up company that has taken much of the world by storm. As we toured their factory, we witnessed both the incredible automation and the SodaStream policy of hiring Israelis and Arabs to work together side by side. The conference then kicked off with an opening ceremony at the Memorial to the Negev Brigade overlooking the city and an opening lecture by the noted author Professor Gil Troy. Our second day began with a visit to "Abraham's Well", a tour of Ben Gurion University hosted by the Vice Rector, a presentation by Nefesh B'Nefesh including a talk by a new oleh to Be'er Sheva and then a meeting with the Deputy Mayor of Be'er Sheva who described her vision for the future of the city. A little free time for dinner gave participants the chance to either visit the "Old City" of Be'er Sheva or visit the newest mall, named the "Grand Kenyon" (Kenyon is Hebrew for mall!)

Day three was hosted for us by JNF and we visited some of the incredible projects that JNF has undertaken in the south. First and foremost was the Indoor Children's Playground and Recreational Center in Sderot. This remarkable play space allows children to be children with easy and direct access to safe shelters within the building any time the siren sounds. We visited a beautiful reservoir just outside of Sderot and were startled to realize that the large clusters of buildings on the other side were all part of Gaza. It's just that close! The afternoon took us to Aleh Negev, a remarkable rehabilitation village for children and young adults that draws visitors from around the world to learn from this Israeli model. Next stop was Wadi Atir in the Bedouin Village of Hura in which we saw a sustainable farm that is based on ecology, technology and sustainable energy to maximize all of its production. Final stop was the amazing Be'er Sheva River Park that is currently under construction. Twice the size of Central Park in NY, this new recreation facility will include every kind of athletic field, walking and hiking trails, an outdoor amphitheater for concerts and performances and a man-made lake for various water activities. Our day ended with a series of workshops by organizations such as Jewish EdTech Solutions and Beit HaTefutsot, that offer curriculum and resources for the teaching of Israel.

Day four began with Shacharit services at the Masorti synagogue in Be'er Sheva. From there we continued to the Ramon Crater for a breathtaking view. After lunch we toured the Ramon Visitor's Center, which has been dedicated to and tells the story of Ilan Ramon, the Israeli astronaut who so tragically perished on the space shuttle. Then a step further back in history as we visited Sde Boker, the desert home of David Ben Gurion (left completely intact) and then Ben Gurion's grave. For dinner we visited the development town of Yerucham and were hosted in the home of one of the residents.

The women of Yerucham have turned their cooking skills into a unique catering business, hosting visitors in their homes and telling their personal stories.

Friday – Day five, was time to head back to Jerusalem for Shabbat. But first we made a stop and conducted a memorial ceremony at Israel's 9/11 memorial in the forest just outside of Jerusalem. Israel is the only country in the world that has a memorial listing all of the names of those who perished. Our participants had a chance to share stories of those they personally knew before we recited kaddish for all.

There is nothing quite like Shabbat in Jerusalem. The spirit of Shabbat is palpable as the shadows grow long and the sun begins to set on Friday afternoon. We broke into smaller groups to visit different synagogues for Kabbalat Shabbat and later shared our experiences together. As we joined together for dinner in our hotel, we hosted David Breakstone, the Deputy Director of the Jewish Agency for Israel. David gave us an entertaining and informative talk after dinner about the challenges of religious pluralism in Israel, particularly as it relates to the non-Orthodox branches. On Shabbat morning we repeated our separate shul experiences, joining together for lunch and then going on a walking tour of our neighborhood, learning the fascinating stories of some of the historical homes and their residents. After a beautiful Havdallah service together, we finally gave everyone a chance to have a little free time to shop, meet friends and family or do additional touring on their own on Saturday night and Sunday.

Prague

Those who continued on to Prague were treated to an intense and inspiring few days in this mystical city. We began with an overview of the city and the history of Prague, a walk through the Old Town and a meeting with Rabbi Ron Hoffberg, the Masorti Rabbi who serves in Prague. The next day we toured the Jewish quarter, reveling in the rich history, and visiting the many synagogues there as well as the old Jewish cemetery. We davened Shacharit in the renowned Altneu (Old/New) synagogue, prolonging its 750 year old tradition as a functioning synagogue. In the afternoon we continued on to the famous Charles Bridge and up to the stunning Prague Castle with panoramic views of the whole city. In the evening we hosted Dan Meron, the Israeli ambassador to the Czech Republic, who shared his unique perspectives and views. Our third day was spent in an emotional visit to the Terzin ghetto and camp. It was hard to believe that we were walking in the footsteps of so many who perished – but we would get to leave. The climax of the day was the final stop at the crematoria – a painful place to visit. After standing in silence, we unfurled an Israeli flag, quietly sang Am Yisrael Chai and then raised our voices high as we chanted Hatikvah with tears streaming down our cheeks. It was a moment that will never be forgotten.

The conference provides a rich opportunity for professional growth, exploration of new trends and ideas and acquisition of concrete programs and materials to bring home to each school and synagogue. Our travels in Israel, in particular, re-invigorated our educators and sent them home with renewed passion and enthusiasm to share their experiences with their students and families.

For more information about the Jewish Educators Assembly contact Edward Edelstein, Executive Director at 516-569-2537 or visit us on the web at www.jewisheducators.org. Be sure to save the dates for our 67th annual conference, January 27-30 in College Park, MD.