

ON BEING TOURIST OR PILGRIM IN THE HOLY LAND

A religious person is someone »who holds God and man in one thought at one time at all times; who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.«

A.J. Heschel (1905–1972)



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THIS COMPANION TO TRAVEL OR PILGRIMAGE IN THE HOLY LAND IS INTENDED TO:

- Help individual visitors, both tourists and pilgrims, to discover and accept the human and spiritual challenge of injustice, separation, violence and suffering prevailing in the Holy Land today.
- Orientate travel agencies, operators, group leaders and tour guides in how to organize and conduct a tour or pilgrimage that doesn't cover up and avoid the Middle East conflict, but helps individuals and groups see and understand its gripping challenges.

Before visiting the Holy Land, consider the following:

- Whether coming from a religious or secular perspective:
 - Every land is »holy« and all human beings are »holy«, i. e. they are to be met with attention and respect and are to be protected and defended against injustice.
 - Every specific country may be called a holy land, because of the toils and achievements of generations of inhabitants, including charismatic religious leaders and their followers.
- Jews, Christians and Muslims rightly call parts of the geopolitical Middle East (including Israel and Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq) »The Holy Land«.
 - For Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, Abraham is the model of a righteous believer.
 - For Jews, parts of the Holy Land were promised to their ancestors under their covenant with God, on condition of their keeping His commandments. (For Zionists, the land is also the Jews' national homestead, embodied in the State of Israel.)
- For Christians, the Holy Land is the place where their savior Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead, and where the first Christian communities originated. (For Christian Palestinians, the same land is their national homestead as well.)
- For Muslims, the Holy Land is part of their ancient heritage, embodying the true worship of God from all prophets down to the Prophet Mohammed. (For Muslim Palestinians, the same land is once again their national homestead.)
- For all people, religious and non-religious, the region is filled with fascinating places of history, culture (including religion) and nature.
- When people visit another country, the local inhabitants often welcome and treat guests with hospitality. In return, they hope visitors will acknowledge them as dignified human beings and as bearers of culture. They hope that visitors are interested in more than just world heritage sites, holy sites, a splendid leisure environment, inexpensive hospitality and perfect logistics, but are also interested in meeting and getting to know the people who live there.
- When people of a country experience problems and hardship, they would like visitors to understand their situation as a whole. They want to draw comfort, encouragement and support from them. Conflict in the Holy Land has been ongoing for hundreds – even thousands – of years; the Middle East conflict is unfolding since a hundred years and the people of the land want visitors to understand their situation the way they see and suffer it.

Welcome to the Holy Land of the Middle East – and consider the various perspectives of groups living in this place!

ADVICE FOR INDIVIDUAL VISITORS OF THE HOLY LAND ...

Tourists

I. Search for and understand reality.

Know where you are going. Read books, websites and materials beforehand. Know feast seasons and days. Know places of cultural life. *And:*

Understand and adapt to local customs, such as dress, photography, how to ask questions, and the appropriate ways to spend money. Learn how to greet, ask for a favor and express gratitude. *And:*

Visit the country on both sides of the divide – both Israel and Palestine. Stay overnight in Israeli-occupied Palestinian areas (but not in Israeli guesthouses there). Experience checkpoints by crossing them attentively. *And:*

Change guides. Hire *local* guides on both sides of the divide. *And:*

Regarding security, consult local partners (tour operators, guides, community members). Visit ›dangerous‹, threatened, beleaguered, contested areas such as Jordan Valley, Jenin, Nablus, Hebron ... *And:*

Face the difficult sides of the conflict: the reciprocal fear, hate, demonization, the disregard, forgetfulness and suppression of the other's existence and historic rights; the history of violence and its causes.

Ask questions to understand. *And:*

Take time *to meet people* and organizations, especially NGOs in occupied territories. Listen, ask and learn. Don't simply attend folkloristic shows – encounter real people! *And:*

Make time for short reflections in the evenings. Discuss stereotypes and challenging perceptions.

Create relaxed time for just observing and sensing a place.

Pilgrims

I. »Teacher, where do you live?« – »Come and see.« (John 1, 38b, 39a)

Actively participate in a study weekend on »pilgrimage«. What are YOU looking for?

Learn beforehand about the local Christians and their churches as well as about Judaism and Islam. Study the meaning of feasts and feast seasons.

Look for accommodation in church-related or otherwise religiously affiliated guesthouses. Even private accommodation might be a fascinating experience.

Ask for spiritual interpretation of specific sites. What might they mean to me ... to us?

Reflect with your group on the various implications of »security« (»my«, »our« security vs. »the others« security and the security of ALL concerned).

Don't seek spiritual self-edification only. Try to see and understand the reality. Resist the temptation to surrender to ›complexity‹ and to ›avoid politics‹.

Have time made for meeting »the living stones«: local Christians and their communities.

Make time for reflection, meditation, prayer, both alone and in a group. Organize a real vigil (overnight prayerful stay) in »The Resurrection« / »Holy Sepulchre.« Keep quiet hours.

Take half a day off to explore sites and places on your own (in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, etc.). *And:*

Expect and voice your expectation that your group leader and your tour guide have skills in adult education. Ideally, an expatriate group leader and the local guide should be in continuous dialogue with each other and with you. *And:*

Take part in at least one Arabic (or other) and one Hebrew religious service, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim – with encounter and explanations.

Resist suppressing irritation, disorientation, or discomfort, but talk about it with your group. Don't indulge in mere sightseeing or a purely pious religious program. Allow for uncertainty! But, again: **Talk** about it in the group!

»None of you is a believer as long as he doesn't wish for his brother what he wishes for himself.«
An-Nawawi (1233–1278)

2. Be compassionate and fair.

**2. Suffers one, suffer all.
 (Cf. 1 Cor 12, 26a)**

Try to sum up for yourself each side's narrative. Sense people's deep trauma. *And:*

Meditate and pray over people's collective hurts, one-sidedness, blindness, fear and hatred.

Look for the difficulties and injuries that each party has both suffered and inflicted – and are still inflicting – on the other. *And:*

Sense the accumulated pain on both sides, the reciprocal demonization and up-holding of enmity. See the body of Christ: still suffering today, being crucified all the time, **here and now**.

Visit memorial sites for the Shoah (Holocaust), the unspeakable peak of eliminatory anti-semitism creating international support for the foundation of Israel, as well as for the Nakba and Naksa (the catastrophic loss of homeland Palestinians suffered in the wars of 1948/1949 and 1967 including strategies of ethnic cleansing and causing the refugee problem).

The same *and:* Reflect and meditate on suffering and injustice without redress, alone and in the group.

Visit outstanding examples of the ongoing military occupation of Palestinian territories, of land-grabbing etc. Meet victims and their advocacy and defence organizations. Listen to the narratives of terror applied by both sides and inflicted on each other in the course of the conflict.

The same *and:* Meet individuals and groups/organizations of both sides that have found ways of exchanging their experiences of pain, reconciling over their grief and loss and choosing nonviolent strategies for stating their case (bereaved parents circles, ex-combatants, resistance activists ...). Sense deeply what has happened here, meditate and pray over it.

Be aware of possible self-deceit people might be consumed by and of emotional pressure they may use when speaking to you. *And:*

Meditate and pray on the trap of self-righteousness.

Tourists

Pilgrims

Detect the many ways people avoid the conflict.
And:

Discover how similar people are all over the world:
They shy away from discomfort and pain.

Weigh the real power of both sides. *And:*

Sense the deep powerlessness on both sides!

Study and consider standards of international law and human rights. *And:*

Meditate and pray on God's will and the enormous power of God's vulnerable love.

Make sure that services you use receive fair payment.

Support the local economy (hotels, restaurants, local products).

Do not exclusively use the Israeli tourism industry.

Try to form relationships with local people. Be open for supporting local NGOs. *And:*

Try to discuss and create community partnerships.

3. Re-Act!

3. »We cannot but speak what we have seen and heard.« (Acts 4,20)

On coming home: Reflect on and share your experience. Speak and write about your experience in the newspaper, in a magazine or in social media. *And:*

Speak about your experience to your church community.

Pay special attention to the news regarding the situation in the Middle East.

Don't be content with superficial reports – dig deeper.

Read more books and websites. *And:*

Deepen your spiritual understanding of the things you saw.

Resist stereotypes and keep learning.

Maintain relationships and connections formed.

Support the cause of justice in ways available to you, such as by speaking up in public, joining initiatives, and lobbying influential people. *And:*

Advocate and lobby in your respective church environment. Don't be surprised about strong, forthright or hidden opposition. Confront fellow believers in calm, but firm dialogue.

»The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these ARE the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.«

(2nd Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes' no. 1 [1965])

ADVICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS

Tour Operators

Investigate your business operations through a »Do No Harm« lens, e.g. ask yourself, do you, perhaps unintentionally, go along with the situation or exploit it to your own benefit? *And:*

Engage licensed or certified tour guides from Israel *and* Palestine. *And:*

Invest in the continuing formation of tour guides, e.g. making them encounter colleagues from »the other side« or training them as adult educators or as intercultural educators. *And:*

Lobby the expatriate and the local tour operator community to establish **common standards** for:

Fair trade of local products, including marketing strategies;

Fair wages for all taking part;

Equitable distribution of income opportunities for transport companies, hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops;

Cooperation of tour operators on the Israeli and Palestinian sides;

Business transparency;

Educational aims of tourism (*integrate cultural heritage, political challenge, leisure; show reality; work for reconciliation and a just peace*);

Environmental considerations.

Regularly consult with the Palestinian Initiative for Responsible Tourism (PIRT) and similar national and international organizations (see links below!).

Develop new, challenging and unique itineraries. *And:*

Pilgrimage Operators

Convince church-related pilgrimage agencies that avoiding conflict situations and political issues goes against the very sense of a Christian pilgrimage. They are God's challenge to our faith. Faith has a dimension of political responsibility.

Make sure that the spiritual accompanier (priest, pastor, other) is open to reality – and trained in »reading the signs of the time« (Enc. Letter *Mater et Magistra*; Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*).

Develop a curriculum »Spirituality of Pilgrimage«, including training sequences for spiritually empowering tour guides.

And:

Consult regularly with respective church institutions and initiatives.

Try to create an ecumenical Christian agreement on **standards of a just pilgrimage**.

Ponder about approaching Palestinian Muslim and Israeli Jewish partners as to discussing and formulating joint standards of pilgrimages.

Give an assignment to write a spiritual guide to the present-day Holy Land. *Imagine Jesus walking the typical situations of the conflict. Share the insights you gain by doing so.*

For deeper information, please, make generous use of the following links:

www.972mag.com – www.alhaq.org – www.atg.ps – www.alternativenews.org/english – www.btselem.org
www.ccao.info – www.dci-pal.org – www.haaretz.com – www.ir-amim.org.il – www.kairospalestine.ps – www.passia.org
www.saintyves.org – www.studienkreis.org/engl – www.tourism-watch.de – www.unocha.org – www.zochrot.org/en