



NOTES FROM JERUSALEM

STEPHEN BAUMAN WAS RECENTLY IN JERUSALEM WITH A GROUP OF 16 SENIOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS FROM NYC REPRESENTING THE ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS TO ENGAGE THE PEOPLE, CULTURE, POLITICS AND RELIGIONS OF ISRAEL/PALESTINE. HERE ARE NOTES FROM HIS TRIP...

MONDAY EVENING 10:15PM:

Today began at 6am and included talks with a variety of religionists, including the head rabbi of the Western Wall, a quick tour through the Christian quarters of Jerusalem including a visit with the Latin Patriarch. (Jerusalem has a complicated Christian history/organization that prominently includes Greek Orthodox, Coptics, Armenians, and Catholics known as the Latins as well as others.) From there we prayed at the Western Wall and ascended to the Temple Mount under Muslim jurisdiction which as the former site of King Herod's Temple now holds several sites sacred to Muslims. Its a spectacular setting, profound and stirring for all sorts of reasons...

From there we had a briefing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and visit to the Israeli Parliament known as the Knesset where we met with several very sharp, articulate members from the left and right as well as the Deputy Foreign Minister, Danny Ayalon who had been ambassador to the U.S.

The day ended with a long visit with Natan Sharansky. He created big news in the 80's after serving 9 years in a Soviet Gulag for desiring to emigrate to Israel (although accused of being a spy.) In 1986 there was a poignant moment captured on video of his traversing the bridge separating East and West Berlin when he was finally granted asylum... [click here for a wiki link..](#)

Spectacular new moon setting low over Jerusalem tonight. I'll see if someone captured a good shot of it. The old city is remarkable and magical, convoluted and dynamic, impressive and troubling.

I've been impressed by the range of opinion we've been exposed to thus far, the honest frankness of our exchanges among ourselves as well as with the people we've engaged. I'm especially impressed by the active, disruptive, aggressive conversation taking place in Israel. Its clear the Arab Spring has upended old assumptions--there seems a kind of "pause" in the air until some sense can be made of the implications.

The religious environment is fraught both within religions and among religions. Certainly between the extremely Orthodox Jews who have a disproportionate influence in the country and all other Jews--but so too among the various tribes of Christians.

Tomorrow we travel to the outskirts of Gaza...

Feel free to send questions or comments...

TUESDAY EVENING, 10:10 P.M.

Today has been especially poignant. It began by our traveling southwest to the Gaza Strip and the town of Moshav Netiv Ha'asarah which abuts the security wall (as the Israelis describe it, and the separation wall as the Palestinians describe it.) Gaza was the area taken over by the radical Hamas which began a regular bombardment of rockets targeting towns like Moshav. Here's a photo of an especially brave woman who was a founding member of this agricultural community who spoke with articulate passion about the necessity of finding a way through the seeming intractability of the current situation. She stands out as a devoted advocate for a patient, enduring, compassionate hope rooted in a realistic appraisal of the actual situation. She believes peace is possible and cares deeply for both her community and many of the people she knew and who once worked within their village now beyond reach behind the wall. I wish you all could have spoken with her and experienced her impressive strength of character.

After visiting Sderot, another town on the Gaza border and interviewing the mayor, we traveled to Bethlehem (located inside the West Bank and behind another security wall, or wall of separation depending upon your point of view). There we were also received by the mayor, an especially articulate and frank interpreter of the Palestinian situation. Too much to report, but by decision of the Palestinian Authority, Bethlehem's mayor must be Christian. He told us five of the 12 council members are from Hamas. The Christian population has been shrinking at a relatively rapid rate for several reasons that include relative status vis a vis Islam and the rocky economy, although, he was no defeatist. An 80-year-old physician he was a canny, though clearly partisan advocate.

Chats with a professor at Bethlehem University, a Rabbi at a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and a western reporter rounded out the day before meeting with a group of Christian and Jewish seminary students on an encounter immersion week in Israel.

Observation: the role of competing narratives is absolutely central to the complex of problems. This is striking when speaking with so many different people in succession. How "facts" are defined and interpreted and articulated--each side (and there are more than two or three) has a compelling storyline. Which story tells the truth?

It was jarring to hear the the theology of the orthodox rabbi of the settlement in the west bank--a completely charming, credible and sincere man who spoke passionately about the Biblical authority of Israel's right to the land. He would have found a completely sympathetic listener in a Christian fundamentalist (and we learned that many made their way to his office). That he and his community live in the disputed territories is trumped by the Biblical imperative.

On the other hand, the Palestinians have a fuzzy, nearly avoidant interpretation of the intifada that wreaked havoc by suicide bombers in Israel proper just a few years ago that lead to the installation of the security walls.

Top the "competing narratives" with the intransigence of the leaders of all sides, and the moment does not seem ready for a major breakthrough. On the other hand, we learned of many granular programs and initiatives between differing peoples that do speak of some sort of eventual hopeful outcome....but a long time in the making?



WEDNESDAY, 6PM

A bit slower pace today, but no less interesting. It was a day characterized in the main by seeing models of peaceful engagement and coexistence beginning with a visit to the Rabin Medical Center in Tel Aviv. A fine hospital, we learned about Israel's universal health care and one of the singular locations (hospitals that is) where all groups, ethnicities, religious persuasions co-mingle. It has become clearer to me that given the enormous complexity of the makeup of the population, Israel is not a melting pot a la the U.S. The stratified groupings are very much separate, even among Israeli citizens. The hospital is a place where the barriers are broken down.

Traveling to Haifa we spent time at the Arab-Jewish Center, a very lively and successful model for bringing people together, principally, though not exclusively, through the arts. Haifa, it turns out, unlike much of the rest of Israel, has an unusual level of cooperation and sense of community among disparate peoples. We met its mayor and several of its significant religious leaders including the International General Secretary of the Baha'i religious community (Haifa is the headquarters of this religion.) Unfortunately we were unable to meet up with Abuna Elias Chacour, the Archbishop of the Melkite Church - he was called away. But we did speak with an impressive array of leaders committed to the common good of the community across ethnic and religious lines.

Currently we're on our way to dinner at the home of one of our hosts who has invited several friends and neighbors representing a diverse neighborhood.....



THURSDAY, 4:15PM

Today was rather special in that it began with an hour long conversation with the President of Israel, Shimon Peres. He graciously received us at his home where he answered very direct questions. He was open, wise, frank and seemingly without a specifically political ax. Most of his views are well known from over 60 years of civil service in nearly every conceivable public role. While the Presidency has some important constitutional responsibilities, it traditionally stands above the parties fractious engagements. In another reflection I will capture more of the flavor of our engagement.

That session set up well our final meeting of our time here with the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Salam Fayyad. Driving into Ramallah through the barrier walls---the current capital of the Authority---I think most of us were surprised to find a rather bustling urban environment with lots of excavating, building projects and sparkling new structures. There has evidently been movement within the economy of Ramallah, and perhaps to a lesser degree, in other parts of the West Bank. Contrary to media imagery, it seemed perfectly safe with the obvious, but nevertheless discreet presence of the Authority's police

The Prime Minister warmly received us and again gave us an hour of his time. He, too, was frank, reflective, and non-evasive tackling a number of hard questions with candor and humility. Of course, he has a point of view, as did Mr. Peres, but several of us thought that if only these two men could find themselves in a room somewhere with the responsibility to broker an agreement--surely they could do it. Alas, its never so simple, and Mr. Fayyad spoke of the difficulty of working with Hamas who "hijacked" the election in Gaza. Nevertheless he stipulated that there could be no ultimate peace without including Gaza within the outcome.

Again, I don't have the time to go into more detail here and will find ways to share more in future reflections.

We're about to have our last debrief among ourselves, share a celebration meal and head to the airport. Friday or Saturday I'll post some overview reflections on this excellent experience.

