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Plans spring from Israeli invitation

Tom Gallagher | Dec. 29, 2011

Salesian Fr. Thomas Curran prays at the Kotel ha-Ma'aravi, or the Western Wall, in Jerusalem. (Marvin Szneler)

In June, Orli Gil, Consul General of Israel to the Midwest, extended an invitation to 11 college presidents of U.S. Midwestern universities to spend a week in Israel. Gil, who is based in Chicago, described the Oct. 22-29 trip as an unparalleled opportunity for the university officials to meet high-level Israeli politicians and leaders of Israeli universities. The itinerary included opportunities to learn of some of the newest Israeli innovations in science, technology, research and development in medicine, alternative energy, agriculture and the environment. The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored and underwrote the costs of the trip, except for each person?s airfare to New York City.

Fr. Thomas Curran, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales and president of Rockhurst University, a Jesuit school in Kansas City, Mo., accepted the invitation. Upon his return, Curran spoke with NCR *about the trip.*

***NCR*: You visited Yad Vashem World Holocaust Center, the Jewish people?s living memorial to the Holocaust. What was that like and what impressions did you take with you?**
Curran: The center is impressive on many levels. It is the second-most-visited site in Jerusalem. There are over 180 million pages of archival information available for research. Four million names of the victims are posted on the website. And there over 380,000 photographs catalogued. One of the most impressive things was the design and structure of the facility. It allows for glimpses of nature from the inside and permits those on the outside ?to peek in.? This spoke volumes to me. When we fail to ?peek in,? so to speak, a holocaust can occur. If apathy and indifference prevail, humanity is at risk. Yad Vashem tells the story of millions but in many respects it?s the narrative of one. I am reminded of the Talmud, where we are told ?whoever saves a life is considered as if he/she has saved an entire world.?

You met with leading academics from Israel?s top schools. What message did they share with your delegation?
The visits included meeting with the presidents and teams from Hebrew University [of Jerusalem], Tel Aviv University, Truman Institute for Peace [in Jerusalem], Weizmann Institute of Science [in Rehovot] and the College of Management Academic Studies [in Rishon Lezion]. Foremost was the exploration of exchange programs with students, faculty and scholars. It was most encouraging to learn of the many programs that are offered in English.

Did any Israeli official discuss the plight of Palestinian refugees or the continuing development of settlements in Palestinian territory?
There was mention of Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority throughout the visit. ... There is frustration with the Palestinian rejection of the two-state nation and their insistence on unilateral movement. As for the recent U.N. initiative by the Palestinians, the Israeli officials reminded us that the U.N. does not have the power to recognize states, only admit them.

You met with a Palestinian official. Did you meet with any religious leaders?
We met with a Palestinian professor at one of the Jewish universities. I would have appreciated more interaction with Palestinians, as well as religious leaders, including a rabbi, Muslim and Christian leaders, as the interaction and strife among the three hearkens back thousands of years, much of it with origins in Jerusalem itself. Additionally, there is significant economic impact on account of the subsidized Orthodox (Haredi), 1.3 million of the 7 million population of Jerusalem as well as non-Israeli population.

Your itinerary included visits to the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace. Do you sense that peace is actually possible between Israel and Palestine?
Yes, there is certainly a desire for peace and prosperity. However, I left with a greater appreciation for the fact that what I may perceive as a solution or way to this peace is not as simple as it sounds. I perceive a Western understanding of problem and solution in a region that has thousands of years of conflict and proceeding in a way that is difficult for me to fully comprehend. One of the presentations at the Truman Institute for Peace lamented the fact that the Israeli media has euphemized the war and made it look natural and justifiable.

Nonetheless, there is also genuine concern in Israel about the region. The Arab Spring indicates a collapse of the Arab world as we knew it. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs speaks about the establishment of new constellations including the northern group of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Then there are the Gulf monarchies, and the nations of North Africa, with Egypt being its own separate constellation. The Foreign Affairs Office is especially concerned about Iran and hopes that Saudi Arabia sends money into the area for stabilization purposes. The most important issue they call Islamization.

Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai has recommended that Israel not become a state of one religion or one ethnic group. Israel, as well as Arab countries, he said, should adopt Lebanon?s government model of democracy, separating church and government [*NCR*, Nov. 11-24]. Did any of the Israeli politicians address the issue of separating religion from the government?
One of the officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged that Israel has an official state religion and that this sometimes presents economic and political challenges. There was no official statement that this should be reexamined. However, I did encounter some Israeli citizens who reminded us that the Zionist movement of Theodor Herzl was focused upon the establishment of an Israeli state absent a religious component. Today, I believe this type of thinking is called post-Zionist.

You had the opportunity to visit Christian religious sites. How did the experience of being at these locations in person affect you?
?There is no place that I should like to see so much as Jerusalem.? These words are attributed to Abraham Lincoln. He supposedly uttered them after being shot by John Wilkes Booth and lay dying in the arms of Mary Todd Lincoln. These words have resonated with me for years. And I agree with James Carroll that Jerusalem, like no other place, occupies a transcendent place in the imagination. For me, there were several experiences that were both moving and inspiriting. Praying at the Kotel [the Western Wall], wading into the Sea of Galilee and reflecting at Tabgha, believed to be the site of the multiplication of loaves and fish, were unlike many other religious experiences for me. While it was an exceptional gift to be able to visit these places, I still believe that God intimately dwells and abides with each of us wherever we are.

What new research did you find compelling?
I found the message of Professor Daniel Zajfman [president of the Weizmann Institute] to be inspiring. He spoke of science for the benefit of humanity and how a nation needs to have scientific literacy. He believes that the citizens of a nation should be expected to determine where science can go, but in order to do so there must be scientific literacy. He also provided for a distinction between industry and the academy, stating that industries deal with the problems of today through a three-year period of incubation but an academy must be preparing for the problems of tomorrow.

What does this experience mean for Rockhurst University?
Kansas City has made a concerted effort to address the life sciences. It?s one of the big five initiatives that the region hopes will distinguish it for years to come. My hope is that Rockhurst can help advance this discussion as it plans to invite Professor Zajfman to come to address the community about science as that pure unrestricted desire to know that we all possess. Additionally, there are opportunities to continue the cooperation between the Truman Institute for Peace in Jerusalem and the Truman Library/Museum in Kansas City. A part of the trip involved meeting the new Israeli ambassador to the Vatican. I have already invited him to consider coming to Kansas City through a joint effort of the Jewish Community Relations Bureau/American Jewish Committee and Rockhurst University. And we will explore faculty and student exchange programs.

Prior to the trip, each college president was provided a copy of *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel?s Economic Miracle* [by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, 2009]. During your visit you met with Singer. What did you learn?
The authors provide some very surprising things about Israel, including that Israel has the highest density of start-ups in the world; Israel has more companies on the NASDAQ than any nation in Europe; Israel has 2.5 times greater venture capitalists than the U.S.; and it was the Israeli Defense Forces that produced the cell phone.

I was left wondering how Israel, this 63-year-old nation, can boast such growth in its economy and show such inventiveness while experiencing two major wars, several skirmishes and two intifadas. Then I discovered the Hebrew word *davka*. It means ?despite.? Despite centuries of persecution, a holocaust, criticism from all over the world and continuous upheaval, the nation of Israel has not only survived, it has prospered and has bred inventiveness. Maybe *davka* should be expanded in its meaning to include a positive word -- *hope*.

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Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel?s Economic Miracle
www.startupnationbook.com

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