

UJC's General Assembly Draws Fourteen Charlotteans to Israel

Fourteen Charlotteans traveled to Jerusalem the week of November 16 for United Jewish Communities' General Assembly of North American communities. Those attending were: David and Debby Block, Roz and Ivan Cooper, Susan and Donald Jacobs, Sue Klein, Sue Littauer, Nicki Ostrow, Jody Pinion, Heidi Rotberg, Sara Schreiberman, Linda Seigel, and Rabbi Ari Sunshine. The comments that follow describe the incredible experience in the delegates own words.

What an amazing experience. Although cramming a trip to Israel into five days makes every day intense, this stands out: our Solidarity March through Jerusalem on the first day of the General Assembly. Marching through the center of Jerusalem, carrying our "Charlotte, NC" sign and wearing our Charlotte America and Israeli flags, part of a crowd of 5,000 to 6,000 participants from North American, American and Israeli flags not quite believing their eyes as we handed out Canadian, American and Israeli flags to the children. Walking to Israeli music playing on the roadside loudspeakers, crowded together in the streets and markets of Jerusalem. I still am incredulous that a main street of Jerusalem was closed to all traffic, during rush hour, so we could march and show our solidarity with Israel. I was very proud to be one of the Charlotte 14, very proud to be marching in Jerusalem with the UJC, very proud to be in Israel.

—Heidi Rotberg

A highlight of the trip for me was a visit to an Ethiopian kindergarten in Rehovot where we were warmly welcomed during a celebration for GA members. The kindergarten focuses on integrating culturally and educationally "at risk" children into Israeli society. This trip was the most incredible experience of my life. It not only helped make the spiritual connection to Israel, but helped me understand the diversity and cultural issues with which the country struggles. The programs we help fund are creative, well-run and critical to Israel's survival as our homeland, and as a Jewish and democratic state.

—Linda Seigel



The mission was an enlightening experience for me. It showed me that while Israel is a country that is attracting an extremely diversified community and that a common thread is Judaism, there exists the serious dichotomy of bringing together such multi-cultural communities. With success, Israel will provide a message of hope to the rest of the world. A truly provocative comment from an Ethiopian woman was (paraphrased), "When I first saw Jews outside of our community, I did not believe at first there could be a Jew with white skin. I thought all Jews had black skin." While there is so much work to do, there is so much hope. I am considering a way in which I may be able to contribute to the success of unifying Judaism within and without Israel. Thanks for the opportunity for the trip. Outstanding.

—David Block



I was very proud of our fourteen-person delegation to the GA who traveled together to be in Israel during this critical time. Marching together alongside the delegations from Greensboro and Raleigh through the streets of Jerusalem surrounded by 5,000 North Americans and Israelis made a big impact on me. It was totally awesome and a moment to be remembered for a lifetime.

—Sue Littauer

During the Solidarity March, people kept coming and coming. We filled Ben Yehuda Street and more. It was the first time I really had a sense of how many people were there for the convention. In every store we went into the merchants thanked us for coming and were so happy for the business. And it was all Judaica. Not a single Christmas decoration anywhere. I talked to a woman who made aliyah three years ago from Richmond. When we told her we were from North Carolina, she was so thrilled. And the more she talked, the thicker her southern accent became.

—Jody Pinion



The weeks before our departure many people asked why were we going to Israel at this time of unrest and fighting. I really was not sure myself. I knew people in Israel who were very close to me had gone ahead with their lives, gotten married and had a baby. Life must go on and going to Israel at this time reinforced the notion. And I am happy to note everything seemed normal. I am so glad that I was able to go in order to reenergize the spirit, refocus the mind and reconnect with Israel. I look forward to a longer visit in the near future.

—Sue Klein



This picture truly represents why I feel so passionately about going to Israel as often as I can and working as hard as possible to help our people take care of our homeland. Imagine traveling to one of the most beautiful places in the world, certainly the most spiritual and meaningful for us Jews, and being thanked for going there. Everyone with whom we spoke shared their concerns about the future of Israel, the challenges of the economic crisis AND their commitment to maintaining our Jewish homeland. Israelis clearly recognize their ties to American Jewry and need for our continued support. We can do so much to help them - and in doing so, will help ourselves develop into the caring people we all want to be.

—Nicki Ostrow



Thanks to The Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte, I was one of fourteen lucky people who had the opportunity to travel to Israel for The United Jewish Communities' General Assembly. The theme of the conference was With Israel, In Israel: Shaping Our Common Future. It was a three-day, whirlwind of events. We heard the President, Prime Minister and other notable politicians, as well as, Israel's most famous entertainers. We marched through the streets of Jerusalem, 5,000 North Americans strong, in a show of our solidarity with Israel. All along the streets, Israelis waved, cheered and even cried. Everywhere we went the Israelis welcomed us and thanked us for coming. This was my third visit to Israel and each time I visit I am overwhelmed by the feeling of "coming home."

—Susan Jacobs

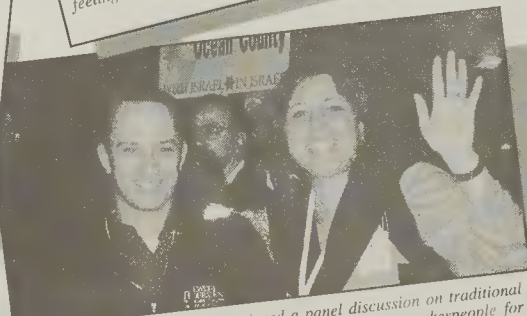


The GA provided Roz and me a chance to participate at a different level than our past "ordinary tourist" type trips. For me, the highlight of the GA was the march from the new convention center, Binyan Haomah, through the streets of Jerusalem, past the open market of Machanah Yehuda, to Ben Yehuda Street and the Zion Square for the speeches, dancing, and general freilach. I was so moved, seeing everyday Jerusalemites standing along the parade route, waving Israeli flags, and just being happy that their over 6,000 brothers and sisters from around the world cared enough about them to show support and march for them. We saw secular and religious Jews all waving Israeli flag, singing and dancing with us, little children with gleams in their eyes, everyone having a wonderful time, enjoying a relief from their stress of everyday life. Each of the other events sponsored by the GA, including officials' speeches, the trips to various parts of Israel, the party in Tel Aviv were wonderful, but paled in comparison to the unforgettable march. As another note, flying El Al, we had our choice of four morning minyan throughout coach. I tried to get upgraded to the business class minyan, but it was full.

—Ivan Cooper

While at the GA, we were assigned to special trips on Tuesday. My excursion, "A Cultural Tapestry," was an amazing day. We began at the Italiani Synagogue first entertained us with an array of Ladino songs. Since I am Sephardic and my family is from Rhodes, and Ladino is the language my parents and grandparents spoke, this performance touched me in a very profound way. Not that I can or ever did speak Ladino, just listening to these men and women who sang with such feeling, made me feel like I was home. From the synagogue, we traveled to the Crown Plaza Hotel where we had snacks at an Indian restaurant and were entertained with traditional Indian music and dance. Lunch followed at the Yemetic community center where we witnessed a special ceremony for a new bride leaving her home and the day ended at an Ethiopian absorption center where children entertained us with traditional Ethiopian dance. While we know Israel is a melting pot and we have supported absorption through UJC, JAFI and the Joint Distribution Committee, it was an amazing experience to see successful and happy immigrants whom we have helped to become important members of the Israeli society while preserving their individuality and heritage.

—Sara Schreiberman



At the GA, I particularly enjoyed a panel discussion on traditional and non-traditional paths to spirituality. Prominent spokesperson for and non-traditional to Jewish tradition in Israel advocated a progressive approach to Jewish tradition for people with different ideas towards a more open and accepting society for people with different ideas of what Judaism's all about.

—Rabbi Ari Sunshine