

# Mission to Israel

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ing, prison garb, tattered, stained; shoes, broken eyeglasses, were all on display. Eleven million people of whom six million were Jews and one and a half million were children. The numbers are staggering. And each number represented a person; someone who couldn't have been much different from any of us. I walked through the museum, my vision distorted by tears. Beyond attending the birth of my children, I'm not sure that I've ever experienced anything so emotionally draining. Or so I thought.

We participated in a Yiskor service in the Hall of Remembrance during which flowers were placed upon stone markers. Each marker was engraved with the name of a concentration camp. An eternal flame burns above the ashes of victims from each of the camps.

At the end of the service we entered the Children's Memorial. A California family, who lost a son, donated the funds. Outside of the memorial were a number of concrete columns, each broken off at different heights. The symbolism was painfully apparent. The Children's Memorial is built into the ground. To enter, you walk down a gently sloping walkway which curves to the left and into the single room of the memorial. It is pitch black inside; the hand rail is your only tie to the physical. Pinpoints of light, each one looking as a star, create the sense of being in deep space, surrounded only by galaxies of stars.

Each pinpoint of light, each star, represents a child lost. A voice speaks a child's name in their native language and repeats it in English. Every child. Every name. 1,500,000 children.

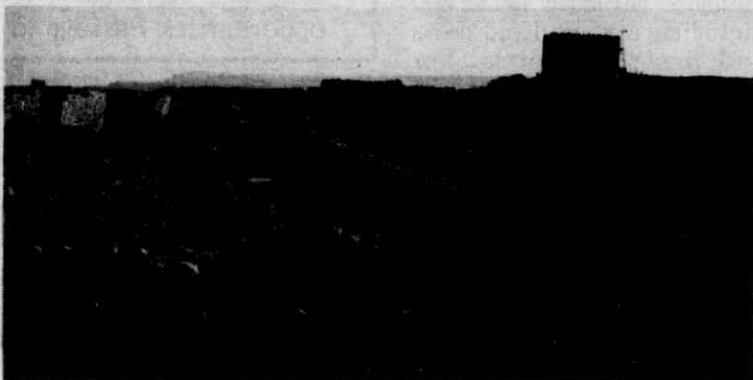
We exited the memorial into the bright sunlight and a stunning view of Jerusalem. The most brutal of contrasts. If I live to be a thousand years old I'll never forget what I saw that Sunday morning in Jerusalem.

We boarded the busses, emotionally drained. I think we all wanted to speak to someone, just to reacquaint ourselves with the present but we were all very empty. "Unbelievable" was a word on everyone's lips.

By the time we reached the east side of Jerusalem, our guide, Matty, had brought us out of our reflections and began preparing us for Masada. On the way, we passed Bedouin encampments complete with livestock roaming around and television antennas sticking up from the tents. We saw a herd of camels and passed the cave in which the Dead Sea



Masada — from base; view east looking westward.  
Photo/P. Joffe



Masada — food storage areas found full when Romans reached summit.  
Photo/M. Joffe



UJA Region III Men's Synchronized Swim and Float Team in practice session.  
Photo/M. Joffe

Scrolls were found. As we headed south, the Dead Sea was immediately to our left and the Jordanian highlands beyond that. We passed the kibbutz of Ein Gedi and the well known spa where a number of us formed what we believe to be the first UJA Region III Men's Synchronized Swim and Float Team late in the afternoon and after visiting Masada.

The contrasts throughout the mission were dramatic. We ate a boxed lunch at the base of Masada, 1300 feet below sea level and the lowest place on earth. Then took the cable car up to the remains of the fortress which is at sea level. Because the mountain is not connected to the surrounding range, Herod perceived it to be a perfect location for a fortress. There is an excellent view in all directions and it is defensible from attacks which would have to originate from the base, attacking upward

instead of from an adjoining mountaintop and attacking across. Anyone looking at Masada understands at once why it was selected. From the ruins the view is awesome. Everything is colored shades of brown and gold. The nearest vegetation is several miles north at the Ein Gedi kibbutz; from the top of the mountain it looks like a green spot far in the distance. The entire region is extraordinarily barren.

Once we were all gathered in the fortress, our guide led us through its history. Nine hundred and sixty Jews allowed themselves to be killed by their own guard rather than be taken as prisoners by the Romans who had surrounded Masada and placed it under siege. The Romans finally reached the summit by building a ramp on the west side of the mountain. When they actually entered the fortress they found everyone dead. They also found ample food sup-



Phil with stones which were rolled down at the Roman legions.  
Photo/M. Joffe

plies and realized then that those men, women and children who were lying dead all around them had made the most tragic of decisions. That statement, made by those ancestors of ours so many years ago, remains powerful and valid to this day; Israeli Defense Force recruits swear their allegiance at night, in candlelight, on Masada. In the future, when people speak to me of freedom and its price, I will think of what hap-

pened on that mountaintop. The price our ancestors paid for their freedom is immeasurable in my terms.

Our mission ended two days later. Monday was spent in Tel-Aviv at the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora and visiting a local kibbutz. Tuesday we toured the Knesset and were addressed by a cabinet official. All of it was interesting but, without question, paled when compared to the events of the preceding several days.

We had a wonderful dinner party Tuesday night and said our farewells to the many delightful people with whom we shared this special mission experience. Most departed for home early the following morning; Maddie and I were staying for a few more days.

*Editor's Note: The final installment will appear in the August issue.*

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