

Vehbi Bajrami

My Visit to the Holy Land

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**Center for
Islamic
Pluralism**

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Cover page, from top to bottom: Moments of prayer by the Western Wall,
inside the Church of Holy Sepulchre, and in the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem.

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To all the victims of the Holocaust – let us hope that humanity will never see such a tragedy again; to all the Albanians who saved Jews during World War Two; to the late Hon. Tom Lantos and to Hon. Eliot Engel, formidable members of the US Congress, who have worked so much to strengthen the excellent relations between Jews and Albanians, by helping to achieve the independence of Kosova; to all the innocent victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to all those who have worked and those who keep working for peace in the Middle East.

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Preface

By Stephen Sylejman Schwartz

Executive Director, Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP)

The Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP), an international network of moderate Muslim intellectuals, journalists, *ulema*, and Sufi *shaykhs*, is gratified to endorse the publication of my friend and colleague Vehbi Bajrami's book on his journey to Israel in 2008, and to support its widespread distribution and discussion. Vehbi, by openly travelling to the Jewish state as the leading Albanian-American journalist, author, publisher, and managing editor of the New York newspaper *Illyria*, showed great courage. While the majority of Albanians are Muslims, they, like most adherents of Islam around the world, know little that is simple, direct, and candid about the realities of life in Israel.

In composing his narrative, Vehbi has spared nothing of what he saw. He has expressed admiration for many aspects of Israeli life but has also asked hard questions, mainly concerned with recognition of the Kosova Republic by Israel. While encouraging him in its publication, we at CIP comprehend that such a book will be very controversial among many Muslims, but we have welcomed it as a contribution to a debate that must take place. The time is long overdue for Mus-

lims, regardless of their views on the topic, to speak with a new honesty about the 62-year confrontation between Israel, on one side, and its Arab and other Muslim enemies, now led by Iran, on the opposite side. We congratulate Vehbi for breaking the silence on this topic, an action that embodies the role, principles, and goals of CIP, although Vehbi is not a member of our organization.

I join Vehbi in thanking the American Jewish Committee and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations for making it possible that groups of moderate American Muslims may tour Israel. I note that two more of my close friends and colleagues, the President of CIP, Kemal Silay, and a CIP Director and leader of the American Shia Muslim community, Nawab Mousvi Agha, were included in the same visit, as Vehbi points out.

Vehbi writes with justifiable pride of the rescue by Albanians, both Muslim and Christian, of Jews on their territory during World War II. Alone among the countries occupied by the Nazis, Albania refused to hand over a single Jew to the criminals who planned and carried out the Holocaust, and was the only Axis-occupied state to count more Jews on its soil at the end of the war than at the beginning. Vehbi's comments on the salvation of Jews by Albanians speak not only to Albanian honor but also provide a powerful repudiation of those who deny the genocide of European Jewry, especially among Muslims, and who are exemplified by the Iranian dictator Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. American Jewish leaders, in many cases acting out of simple conscience and memory of their own people's suffering under fascism, rather than detailed knowledge of Albanian-Jewish relations, similarly defended the Albani-

ans of Kosova from an attempted genocide during the 1998-99 NATO intervention against Serbia. Without the evil of Hitler in the Holocaust, Serbia would never have believed it enjoyed impunity in its attacks on Bosnian Muslims as well as against Albanians, who, to repeat, include both Muslims and Christians. The road to Auschwitz, which should have been closed forever, led to Srebrenica and Korenica. A Balkan Muslim foolish enough to deny the Holocaust of the Jews has committed moral suicide, supporting the hand holding the knife that cut so many throats in ex-Yugoslavia.

Vehbi has disclosed many aspects of Israeli life that are unknown to the Muslim world. To cite one very significant example, he describes the Islamic Shari'a courts supported by the Jewish state as a legal right of Muslim Arabs.

I am further gratified that Vehbi so thoroughly observed the saintly life and work of another friend and colleague, the late Sufi *shaykh*, *rahmetli* Abd Al-Aziz Bukhari, who lived in East Jerusalem and was a descendant of Imam Bukhari, the great compiler of *hadith* or oral commentaries by the Prophet Muhammad *sallallahualejhisalaam*. *Shaykh* Bukhari, whose ancestors came to Jerusalem centuries ago, was the leader of the Uzbek Muslim community in the city. But we were shocked and outraged that this honorable man of peace suffered physical aggression and the usurpation of his Sufi center by Wahhabi fundamentalists. In this regard, *Shaykh* Bukhari in East Jerusalem stood on the same front line against Wahhabi aggression that we see in Tetova, in Western Macedonia, where the Harabati Bektashi Sufi shrine is under the same kind of attack. Wahhabis in East Jerusalem and Tetova both exploit local ethnic conflicts – Arabs vs. Jews, Slavs vs. Alba-

nians – to advance their evil agenda for subversion of pluralistic, traditional, and spiritual Islam.

A similar fundamentalist spirit of intolerance among Muslims led to the attempt, recorded by Vehbi, to exclude him and the rest of his group from a visit to the *Haram-i-Sharif*, precincts of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque, by “guards” who challenged the visitors’ Islam. But the values of traditional Islam prevailed in that situation and Vehbi and his companions enjoyed their visit to the Islamic holy sites of Al-Quds, as well as to the Western Wall where Jews gather to pray. Vehbi notes that the reconstruction of the Wall and the provision of a prayer space adjoining it were ordered as a service to the Jews of Jerusalem, and to Jewish pilgrims, by the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman Kanuni, and completed by the Albanian-born architect Mimar Sinan, perhaps the greatest of all Islamic builders.

Vehbi serves the truth in a dramatic and extremely significant way when he describes the tunnel constructed under the *Haram-i-Sharif*, which has been the subject of many accusations against Jews and Israel by Arab radicals. The latter claim that the tunnel is intended to undermine and destroy the Islamic monuments in the *Haram*, but Vehbi provides personal evidence of the non-destructive goals and methods employed in completing the tunnel. CIP has long pointed out the hypocrisy present when Wahhabi extremists, who have destroyed much of the Islamic heritage of Mecca and Medina, including the house where the Prophet Muhammad lived (impelled by the irrational belief that preservation of historic mosques and similar structures is a form of idol worship), emit continuous and dishonest rhetoric accusing the Israelis of such vandalism. Vehbi Bajrami now stands as a witness to the falsity of this lie.

I am further gratified that Vehbi met with and recounts his discussions with the Israeli Arab journalist Khaled Abu Toameh, a newsgathering colleague with a similar attitude of fearlessly accurate reporting. Abu Toameh began as a media advocate for the Palestinian Liberation Organization and now contributes to *The Jerusalem Post*. Abu Toameh's truth-telling about the corruption of the Palestinian leadership under Yasser Arafat is heroic. Vehbi visited the Al-Qasemi Academy, an Islamic institution at Baqa al-Gharbiyya on Israeli territory, animated by the Sufi spirit and unique in its record as an exemplar of Muslim education in Israel.

Finally, Vehbi reminds us of the horror of the Kosova war, and specifically of the massacre of Albanian Catholics at Korenica, near Gjakova, ten years ago. Here a circle is closed; CIP has supported both the Al-Qasemi Academy and the primary school at Guska, near Korenica, where Catholic and Muslim children – most of whose parents were brutally murdered – study together.

Vehbi Bajrami has seen many things that needed to be seen, and in this book has written many things that needed to be expressed. His work is a credit to the Albanian people.

Washington, December 2010

[Stephen Sylejman Schwartz is the author of *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony*, published in English in 2008, and in Albanian in 2009, as *Islami Tjetër: Sufizmi dhe rrëfimi për respektin*. He has published many other books, including three more in Albanian. The Center for Islamic Pluralism is accessible at www.islamicpluralism.org.]

WHEN YEHUDIT BARSKY from the American Jewish Committee (AJC) told me I was included in a group invitation from the Committee to visit Israel, I did not hesitate to respond positively. A visit to the Holy Land is a dream for many people in this world and I was one of them.

I had read a lot about Israel and the Jewish people, I had Jewish friends in New York and I was aware of the old friendship between the Albanian and Jewish nations and communities, however, I had never been to Israel and the invitation intrigued me in many ways.

"The program will be interesting. Everything is well-prepared and we would be honored to have you join the visiting group," said Ms. Barsky, who is Director of the Division on the Middle East and International Terrorism at AJC.

AJC, through its Project Interchange, was one of two organizations involved in sponsoring this visit, a joint effort with the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations in cooperation with the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"It would be a seminar," Ms. Barsky explained, "to provide you with an overview of contemporary Israel and with a better

understanding of the country's political, historical and religious context — including issues of religious diversity.”

“We hope the seminar will allow you to gain an enriched appreciation for the challenges and opportunities facing Israel and her neighbors,” said the official invitation sent to me, among other things.

The invitation came a month before the visit and was followed by ample information about the places scheduled for our visit and the personalities in political and academic life that we would meet. I also received some information about the history of the Jews through the thousands of years before foundation of their state in 1948, including articles by various authors about the problems the new state faced, relations with its neighbors, and the hostilities that stand in the way of the peace for the troubled Middle East.

A diverse group of interesting participants

From the beginning I realized that the visit had been very well-organized. Indeed, the visit “began” before our departure for Israel. At JFK Airport, a few hours before leaving, we gathered in a synagogue on the fourth floor of Terminal 4, adjacent to Christian and Muslim prayer sites. There, a group of rabbis and activists offered us their best wishes for the trip together with advice and more information about Israel and our sojourn there. (I was not aware that JFK Airport offered religious services to Muslims, Christians and Jews, performed by on-site imams, priests and rabbis. It seems a group of Jews came up with the idea. Not far from there, a synagogue once stood, which was demolished when the airport was built. As a compromise agreement, inside the airport a space was left



The author of this book (left) with the other participants in the trip to Israel.

vacant for an improvised synagogue. It was followed later by sites belonging to other religions.)

“This is the only airport in the world that has three religious worship sites directly adjacent to each other,” said Rabbi Bennett M. Rackman. “For those who come to pray here there is free parking.”

At the airport, I met the other participants in the trip, which was titled by the organizers the “Seminar in Israel for American Muslim Leaders.” (Like many Albanians, I don’t identify myself much with religion, even less being some kind of a leader of a religious community. Nevertheless, the program seemed quite interesting and I managed to look past that title). We took advantage of the occasion to introduce ourselves. We

were all living in America but we came from different backgrounds.

Right there I was in for the first surprise of that trip. One of my fellow travelers introduced himself as Dr. Tawfik Hamid, a former member of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, an Islamic extremist and terrorist organization once led by Ayman al-Zawahiri.

I could not believe my ears. What kind of group was this? Had I read the information correctly? My concern soon vanished, after I heard the rest of Dr. Hamid's introduction and those of the other members of the group who were in some ways more "normal."

Dr. Hamid eventually "saw the light," had broken with his terrorist organization and had become an advocate of peaceful and tolerant Islam. He is a writer and a consultant, but he has also lectured in many U.S. universities and has been interviewed by many U.S. and international media organizations.

Mr. Nawab Mousvi Agha participated as chairman of the American Muslim Congress. However, he is also the Director of the Garden State School of Business in New Jersey and Director of the Irvington Urban Enterprise Zone.

Vian S. Akrawi was an analyst in the Critical Infrastructure Protection Division of the Office of Homeland Security in Tennessee.

Dr. Tasneem Shamim came as the President of the Muslim Women's Coalition (MWC). She is from New Jersey, but MWC has offices also in Washington, D.C. and Texas.

Dr. Kemal Silay participated as the President of the well-known Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP) in Washington, D.C.. This organization is playing a crucial role in the resist-

ance against radical Islam in the Balkans, among other places, and the promotion of progressive Islam, with the Albanian Sufis as one of its primary examples.

Dr. Silay is Chair of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies, Director of the Turkish Program, and Professor of Central Eurasian Studies at Indiana University. Nawab Mousvi Agha is also affiliated with CIP.

It was a pleasure to learn that Ms. Barsky would join us during the trip. She had done a great job in presenting the seminar to the invitees and was dedicated to help with everyone's needs.

The hosts at the airport synagogue told us about the ancient and new history of the Jews, and there is a lot to say on this topic. Few people in the world have left deep traces in the history of humanity as the Jews have — this exalted nation with their old genetic heritage and unparalleled sufferings.

In the end, even with their own state in place, calm has still not come for the Jews. Israel, the most developed country in the Middle East, "is a democracy living under constant threat of gunfire," an Israeli general would later tell me. Security remains the main challenge, with neighbors that deny the country's right to exist. Israel and the lands that surround it have seen ongoing violence for quite some time now.

The issue of security also comes up in conversations with the rabbis in the airport and other topics have been in the focus of the international media for years: Hamas, Fatah, Hezbollah, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, kidnappings, suicide terrorism, efforts for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, the conferences, handshakes of the leaders, signed agreements... After all these, violence always returns. No other



Malcolm Hoenlein

conflict in the world grabs so many headlines and so much of the world's public attention. Yet the hope for peace in the region is strong despite the discouraging results.

On the wall of the synagogue, I noticed a cloth banner featuring religious figures with Hebraic writings, sent by someone as a gift from India. Among other things, it is written: "Love your neighbor as yourself." It does not sound new to me. The same message is found not only in Judaism but also in Islam and in Christianity. Nevertheless, massive and bloody wars still happened

among neighbors. There is war today between the neighbors in Palestine, Jews and Arabs. What happened to loving the neighbor as yourself?

Peace is always possible, but as I saw first-hand during my visit in the Holy Land, it is still far off in the Middle East.

"Israel is not a perfect state, but it is certainly not what some media want to make of it," says Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice-director of the Conference of Presidents. "This state, within a short period of time, has reached many successes, but it faces serious challenges by the terrorism of organizations such as Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, etc. Iran is an example of state terrorism, sponsoring terrorist organizations in the

region, with open declarations of its desire for the elimination of Israel from the face of the earth.

"No country in the world," says Hoenlein, "would have remained inactive, if faced with these actions, which have one common denominator: the destruction of Israel."

After him, Rabbi Bruce Ginsburg spoke, focusing on the ancient and recent history of the Jews, the roots of their traditions and language, and how it all began with the father of the Jews, Abraham, who thousands of years ago moved from the valley between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates to the land of today's Israel, the land that was promised to him by God.

At the end of this meeting the Rabbi told us: "You are blessed with the chance to visit the Holy Land. Have a great trip!"

Arrival at Ben Gurion Airport

I have travelled very often by plane in recent years, but I had never seen such a strong security network and set of questions as that day, before checking in luggage in terminal 4 at Kennedy Airport.

The person in charge grilled me with questions, and kept looking me in the eye the entire time: where and when I was born, what kind of job I had, why I was going to Israel, had I ever been there, what I had in my luggage, etc.

This procedure took place a few hours before departure. We live in an unsafe world because of terrorist attacks and no one has paid as dearly from this phenomenon as Israel. September 11, 2001 was a wake-up call for the entire world, to step up security in airports and be sure to screen everyone who gets in the plane. You never know when the terrorists may strike



David Ben-Gurion - (1886 - 1973)

next.

The El Al airplane took off in the early hours of January 7, 2008, and reached Tel Aviv at around five in the afternoon, according to local time. As the plane was approaching Israel I kept observing the unique beauty of the land, thinking about the suffering of the Hebrews over the centuries and their determination to return to the home from where they had been expelled. The challenges would not end with the foundation of their state.

The plane had flown for nearly ten hours from America, over the Atlantic Ocean, across Europe, near the Adriatic Sea, Albania, and Greece, when we heard the voice of the pilot: "We are at Ben Gurion Airport. Shalom and welcome to Israel!"

This is the most important airport in the country. The majority of international flights departs and arrives here.

In 1973 it was named Ben Gurion after Israel's first Prime Minister and one of its best known politicians.

David Ben Gurion declared the independence of Israel on May 14, 1948 and the same day he became Prime Minister of the new state. He directed the first war with the Arabs, and had been one of the first Jewish leaders to warn, in the 1930s, that a difficult conflict would arise with the Arabs over the land

issue.

He once proudly announced that "Israel has created a new image of the Jew in the world – the image of a working and intellectual people, of a people that can fight heroically." But he was aware of the image problem that a bloody conflict with the Arab neighbors would inevitably create. He was one of the first to build strong military capacities for Israel and is said to have declared: "Unless we show the Arabs that there is a high price to pay for murdering Jews, we won't survive."

One thing that impressed me was that our visit companion Mrs. Barsky kneeled and kissed the ground when we left Israel. I don't know whether all Jews do this, but it was very impressive to see. I had seen Dr. Tawfik Hamid do the same thing when we arrived.

Tel Aviv appeared to me in all its beauty. Those beautiful buildings, large and small, the Mediterranean, the streets... This new city, that today has 400,000 inhabitants was founded in 1909 and is known as the first Hebrew city built in modern times. It is the industrial, trade and financial heart of the state of Israel.

Our encounter with an Israeli colleague

Ours was an official visit. Nevertheless, in the airport there were some procedures to pass through, mostly related to customs.

We were greeted by Salih Abu Tarif from the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, who was going to be with us during the entire sojourn. Also with us would be Aharon Yahav, a dynamic guide who knows the history of Israel in detail, as well as the driver of the minibus, at our disposal from the beginning.



David Horovitz (left), Publisher and Editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post* with Dr. Kemal Silay, Chair of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies at Indiana University.

"We have to hurry," Aharon said to us as soon as we got in the car. "Tonight we shall be in Jerusalem. We have a dinner at the Canela Restaurant."

There waiting for us was Bahij Mansour, Director of the Interreligious Affairs Department at the Foreign Ministry of Israel, Tzipi Barnea, Associate Director & Project Interchange Program Director at the Israel/Middle East office of the American Jewish Committee, and David Horovitz, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *The Jerusalem Post*.

Forty minutes later we were in Jerusalem. We take the Jaffa Road, the longest and the oldest in Jerusalem. It enters the City heading East to West, from the walls of the Old City to

downtown Jerusalem. The first terrorist bombing in a public place in the Middle East happened precisely on this road. In November 1937, an explosion killed two people and wounded five others.

There is great activity and daily endless visitors come to this historic road. This has given birth to a project that aims to redevelop Jaffa Road, inside Jerusalem, into a car-free pedestrian-only mall. Visitors, employees and local residents would have the option to use Jerusalem Light Rail to travel along the road.

I don't see police or soldiers on the streets. This city that appears so often in the TV screens because of the on-going conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, tonight looks very quiet.

It's late in the evening when we enter the restaurant. The main person we will meet tonight is David Horovitz, author of several books, including a biography of the assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He has won several awards as a journalist, one for reporting on the terrorist attack against Israel's Embassy in Buenos Aires, in 1992. (Twenty nine people died and 242 were wounded in this attack, organized by Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Several of the dead were Israeli, but most of the victims were Argentines, many of them children.)

As we headed towards the restaurant, I remembered some of the articles that had interested me the most from *The Jerusalem Post*. Among the most significant was a recent letter in the newspaper by Shlomo Avineri, sent to "a Serbian friend," where he advised him to get over the past and recognize the new reality in Kosova for the sake of a quick integration of Serbia in Europe, and a better future.

Shlomo Avineri is a Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His articles are the main reason I often turn to *The Jerusalem Post*. It is amazing to perceive his great understanding of Balkan affairs.

In 2006, right after Montenegro declared its independence and became the last Yugoslavian republic to separate from Serbia, Avineri predicted in *The Jerusalem Post* the declaration of independence of Kosova. It happened two years later. "Serbian rule over the Kosovar Albanians was the last example of colonial rule in Europe," he wrote. "NATO put an end to it. Now the outcome – independence – has to be granted international legitimacy. There is no other way."

Only a few weeks before our visit, on November 26, 2007, the Albanian Ambassador in Israel, Tonin Gjuraj, published an op-ed on Kosova in *The Jerusalem Post*, setting forth the arguments for why Kosova deserved independence.

It was followed by a reply from the Serbian Ambassador to Israel, Miodrag Isakov, trying to argue the opposite by using the same discredited arguments that official Serbian propaganda has used for almost a century.

Horovitz was born in London and has a British accent. He became editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post* in 2004. *The Jerusalem Post* is one of the oldest newspapers in the country, once called *The Palestine Post* and entirely in the English language. Its circulation in Israel is dwarfed by other daily newspapers, but it remains a respected and quality publication.

David Horovitz said, "Israel is a small state, but with a strong economy and military; however, the population feels very vulnerable when it comes to today's and tomorrow's security. Compared to four years ago, the security situation has

improved significantly. The walls built along the border with the Palestinians have made an important change. Most of the Israelis want the Palestinians to have their own state. They want peace to win over the violence. However, the will of Israel and the will of the Palestinians are not enough to achieve peace."

Horovitz emphasized that Iran is a major problem because it is sponsoring terrorist activities and those who are fighting against Israel. Iran has also begun a speedy process to build nuclear weapons; it is the biggest threat of the peace for the entire region...

What about the demands for the return of the Palestinians refugees in Israel?

"If those demands are met, there wouldn't be an Israel anymore. There are millions of people who want to return," responds Horovitz.

He says that if the Palestinians opt for compensation instead of return, the issue would be resolved in 24 hours.

Our fellow participant in the seminar, Dr. Tawfik Hamid, who is of Egyptian origin, says that compensation should be reciprocal. There are many Jews expelled from the Arab countries. They should be entitled to compensation, too, if a deal is reached for the Palestinian refugees.

Other issues were debated, as well. Horovitz is very clear in his descriptions and explanations.

He speaks about the numerous Jews who emigrated from Russia to Israel after the collapse of communism. The flux was so great that today one in every seven Israelis is of Russian origin.

From 1948, when it was founded, the demography of the

state of Israel has changed dramatically (in the beginning there were only one million inhabitants.) The government has put in place several programs over the years inviting millions of Jews to the country from all over the world, including Ethiopia. Israel has a population of seven million today, but it still continues its appeal to Jews around the world: Come and live in your land! Israel is waiting for you! The government has special programs that help with their housing, education and health care, everything free of charge.

The meeting ended after two hours and we left for the Inbal Hotel where we were to spend our first night in Israel. I gave Mr. Horovitz an article that I had written on the traditions of Jewish-Albanian friendship and which also argued against some of the Serbian allegations spread among Jews, against Albanians in general and Kosova in particular. Mr. Horovitz receives it with enthusiasm and thanks me for it. However, the article would not be published and a few weeks later, he would refuse a request to be interviewed by my newspaper *Illyria* in New York.

Our guide is tireless. He never takes his mike out of his hand. He seems so proud as he speaks about the history of his country and of his people.

I imagine that he represents the kind of love and zeal that made the Jews from all over the world come and build their country from scratch, making it, in a very short time, the most developed country in this part of the world. Those who did not move to Israel helped with donations.

The Jews worked hard and transformed the land. They made the desert green; they built towns and villages, buildings and parks. They developed the economy, the health care and

education system, tourism, etc. The state functions well, the economy grows and the jobless rate has been quite low.

If it weren't for security problems, this would have been a miracle on earth. The Israelis cannot sleep because of this. The terrorists chose madness: strapped with explosives they entered restaurants, markets and the most heavily populated streets to blow themselves up. Who came up with this evil fantasy of killing unsuspecting, innocent people?

These "martyrs" of modern times claim to recite from *Qur'an* and say "Allahu Akbar", as in the mosque, before departing for the "self-sacrifice". But where does *Qur'an* speak about killing innocent people? How dare these people manipulate *Qur'an*?

Israel as a target of the Arab media

The second day in Jerusalem. The city was bathed by the first full rays of the morning sun. I opened the window to better enjoy the sight of the city. It has a festive atmosphere. Israeli and U.S. flags are visible everywhere. Tomorrow, President George W. Bush will come to visit. Israel is doing its best to greet this important, great friend.

As we went down for our first breakfast in Israel, I was surprised to see our friend from the previous night, Mr. Horovitz, who had come again, early in the morning, to meet once more with Dr. Hamid and was conducting a quick interview with him. There was little interest for us in the local media, despite the symbolism of this visit. The only occasional exception involved Dr. Hamid, clearly because of his terrorist past.

In his article on Dr. Hamid, Horovitz mentions the meeting with our group and his surprise at Dr. Hamid's argument that if

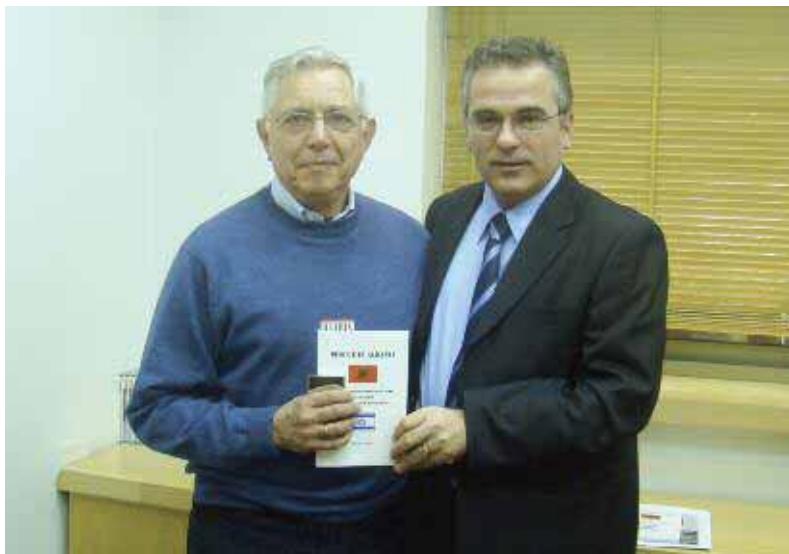
reparations are given to the Palestinians who left Israel then Jewish refugees who left the Arab countries to establish themselves in Israel should ask also for reparations from those Arab countries.

Horovitz says a few words about Dr. Hamid as an introduction to a biographical article on the former member of a notorious Egyptian terrorist group, which had been published earlier by the Hudson Institute.

"Written by a man who saw the warning signs just in time to change the course of his own life, it stands as a chilling reminder of how many others are being wooed along the bleak path of extremism, without turning back, across the Middle East and beyond," Horovitz says in his article.

The first visit for today is at the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). We are greeted by the smiling director of the institute, Menahem Milson, Academic Advisor, Professor Emeritus of Arabic Studies and Arabic Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, author of numerous works on the Middle East and with an excellent knowledge of the Israeli-Arab relationship.

The institute was founded in 1998 in Washington, where its headquarters are located, and where it does great work to inform the debate over U.S. policy in the Middle East. It has offices in London, Tokyo, Rome and Baghdad. One of its most prominent goals is "bridging the language gap between the Middle East and the West". Therefore they offer translations of news, comments and analyses from the Middle Eastern newspapers, websites, radio and TV. MEMRI translates these materials from Arabic, Hebrew, Persian and Turkish and also follows the political, ideological, social and cultural trends in the countries where these



Menahem Milson (left), director of Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) in Israel with the author.

languages are spoken. They monitor religious sermons, textbooks and the content of such television channels as Al-Arabiya TV (Dubai), Al-'Alam TV (Iran), Iqra TV (Saudi Arabia), Syrian TV (Syria), Al-Majd TV (UAE), etc. MEMRI offers these translations and information in English, German, Hebrew, Italian, French, Spanish, Turkish, and Russian.

After introducing himself, Professor Milson goes to a monitor and prepares a CD containing clips from programs broadcast by Arabic TV channels. They are divided in two parts. The first batch of television images shows people who talk in moderate terms about Israel and who condemn the phenomenon of terrorism and extremism in their own countries. The second part is a parade of hate speech with harsh words and rigid attitudes towards the state of Israel and the Jews in general.

It takes only a few moments watching these programs to understand the deep hate incited against Israel by media in the Middle East. In a clip from one of these TV programs, an imam preaching to believers yells loudly that Israel is “the cancer of the region”. His sermon is also directed against America. And here is his “prophecy”: “The day will come when the Muslims will rule America!”

Another documentary, broadcast in Iran, glorifies the terrorists who attacked New York on September 11, 2001.

The picture would not be complete, if I didn’t add the element of including children in the propaganda of hate against Israel. A column of armed children, recruited from jihadist groups, march to show their readiness to continue the fight against Israel for generations to come. Right after it, a three-year old child speaks on TV calling the Jews “apes and pigs.”

Before leaving MEMRI I made sure I had a copy of the clips from the programs that we saw and Professor Milson was nice enough to help provide me with it.

In return I left him a copy of Harvey Sarner’s book on the rescue of Jews in Albania.¹ (I had taken many copies with me and made sure to leave one everywhere we went.) Few people in Israel are aware that Albania saved one hundred percent of the Jews within its present borders during the Holocaust, and it was the only Nazi-occupied country to have more Jews at the end of than at the start of World War II.

We quickly got in the van to run for the next meeting. Now we take Yitzhak Rabin Boulevard, named after Israel’s Prime Min-

¹ Sarner, Harvey, *Rescue in Albania*, Cathedral City, CA, Brunswick Press, 1997, with an Albanian edition, *Shpëtimi në Shqipëri*, Tirana, Koha, 1999.



With Kadi Ahmed Natour, President of the High Shari'a Court in Jerusalem.

ister, who was assassinated in 1995 by an Israeli radical opposed to the Oslo Peace Agreement.

Rabin, an important military leader during the victorious war against the Arabs in 1948 and the triumphant Six Day War in 1967 against Egypt, Syria and Jordan, was the first Israeli Prime Minister born in Israel. He was also the only one killed while in office.

Today, there are thirteen boulevards throughout Israel with the name of the former Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

The program of our visit includes not only meetings with Jewish officials and personalities from the country but also with Muslims. A little more than 23 percent of the population in Israel is non-Jewish. Muslims dominate as the largest minority with 16 percent of the entire population. About 1.7 percent are Christian Arabs, 1.6 percent are Druze, while a mosaic of other ethnic and

religious communities make up around four percent of the country's population.

At the High Shari'a Court of Appeal in Jerusalem we meet with Kadi Ahmed Natour, the President of the Court. As soon as he saw us he greeted us with the words "As-Salaamu Alaykum", the common greeting among Muslims. It literally means "Peace be upon you."

The honorable Kadi explained to us how the system of Shari'a Courts works in Jerusalem. It reminded me of the tales of the old people from my birthplace about the trials based on Shari'a and the power of the kadis in charge of justice matters during the time of the Ottoman Empire.

The High Shari'a Court of Appeal was founded in 1917. The Kadi is a Muslim judge who takes decisions based on Islamic religious law. Most of the cases have to do with matters of marriage and divorce, but are not limited to them. In the entirety of Israel there are eight Kadis and we visited the office that oversees them.

"All our decisions are final," says Kadi Ahmed Natour. "There can't be a law above this Law.

"This is our Law of Islam," he says proudly and points out that there is no longer a Sultan to exert justice. Now, it is the job of the Kadis to make sure that the canon law of Islam is respected and applied.

He also complains that he does not enjoy enough support from the government of Israel. He insists that Arabs should have more of their own schools and hospitals.

"A female patient should be assigned to a female doctor," he says. "We lack hospitals where we can send our women and daughters."

"Who pays the salary for the job that you do?" I ask the Kadi.

"The state pays us, but that is not the point. We need schools and hospitals," he repeats.

Some female employees, with their heads covered, brought us files with materials providing information about the history and the role of the High Shari'a Court of Appeal. However, I had no use for them as they were only in Arabic, which I do not read.

"As-Salaamu Alaykum" and "Alaykum As-Salaam", we greeted each other as we headed towards the elevator.

Visiting the Old City of Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a wonderful city. Every inch of this Holy Land bears something from the 4,000 years of history that has taken place around it. The Israelis consider it their capital. However, so do the Palestinians, who hope to govern the independent state for which they are fighting from East Jerusalem.



The holy sites of religions in Jerusalem.

Divided and united many times during its long history, this is the only capital of the world without embassies. The U.S. Embassy and those of the other countries are located in Tel Aviv.

Both former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush declared their acceptance of Jerusalem as the true capital of Israel during their electoral campaigns, however, for Washington the status of this city is better left to be decided later in the peace process.

Today Jerusalem has about 750,000 inhabitants, of whom 530,000 are Jews, 204,000 are Muslims and 18,000 are Christians.

Jerusalem is a holy place for three religions. To Christians it is the place where Jesus Christ lived, preached and died crucified. Among the places mentioned in the Bible, Jerusalem includes the burial place of Jesus (now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), the Garden of Gethsemane (where Jesus and his disciples are believed to have prayed the night before Jesus' crucifixion) and The Cenacle, believed to be the site of Jesus' Last Supper. The Via Dolorosa (Road of Suffering) is a street in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is believed to be the path that Jesus walked, carrying his cross, on the way to his crucifixion. Nine of the fourteen Stations of the Cross are on this street.

To the Jews, Jerusalem is the place where the Temple of Solomon was located. The Western Wall (or the Wailing Wall) is the only part that has remained from the famous temple and focus of the Jewish prayers and nostalgia through the last 19 centuries.

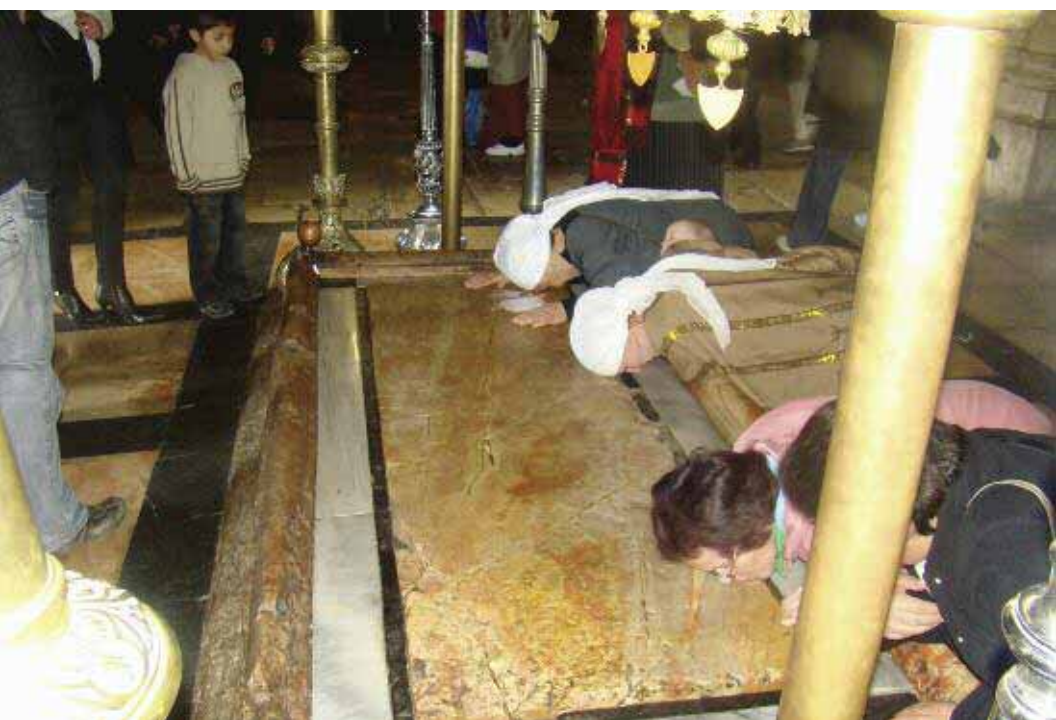
The First Temple was built in 967 BC by Solomon and was

destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The Second Temple was rebuilt in 516 BC and was destroyed during the Siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, in 70 AD.

The Western Wall is all that is left from this second destruction. Within the perimeter of the temple are what the Jews consider the Foundation Stone and Mount Moriah where Abraham bound his only son Isaac as he prepared him for the sacrifice to God.

Mount Zion is the location of the Tomb of David, while the Mount of Olives hosts the ancient cemetery where Jews have buried their relatives for centuries.

According to Islamic belief, Muhammad was transported miraculously from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there rose to



Pilgrims in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre kissing the place where Jesus Christ was buried.

the heavens. The Dome of the Rock mosque (*Masjid Qubbat As-Sakhrāh* in Arabic) and The Furthest Mosque (*Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa* in Arabic), known together as "*Al-Haram ash-Sharif*" and built in the seventh century AD, convinced the Muslims that Jerusalem is the "Far Place" mentioned in *Qur'an*. This qualifies the City as the third holiest place for Muslims after Mecca and Medina.

The holy places of these three major religions are so close to each other, but they have not generated peace around them. Instead, over the centuries they have seen wars and suffering while the history is retold often in three different versions, one for each religion represented in the Old City.

Old Jerusalem has eight gates. The Jaffa Gate is one the entrances that will lead you inside the ancient walls surrounding the city. It is also known as David's Gate and is a stone portal in the walls. When you exit from the city, the Jaffa Gate is the portal for Jaffa Road that was used for centuries to connect Jerusalem with the ancient port of Jaffa and the Mediterranean coastal plain. The Road lent its name to the Gate. Today the old road has been replaced by a modern highway.

We're inside Old Jerusalem and we walk slowly up an old street with small buildings on both sides. Christians, Jews and Muslims have their shops here. If you're looking for religious merchandise they have everything there: old photos of religious temples, icons, religious souvenirs, crosses, etc. Of course, there are stores that sell clothes, restaurants, butcher shops and everything else. The old and the new co-exist quite well in this place where visitors clearly outnumber the local inhabitants.

Our tour includes a walk along the Via Dolorosa. Millions

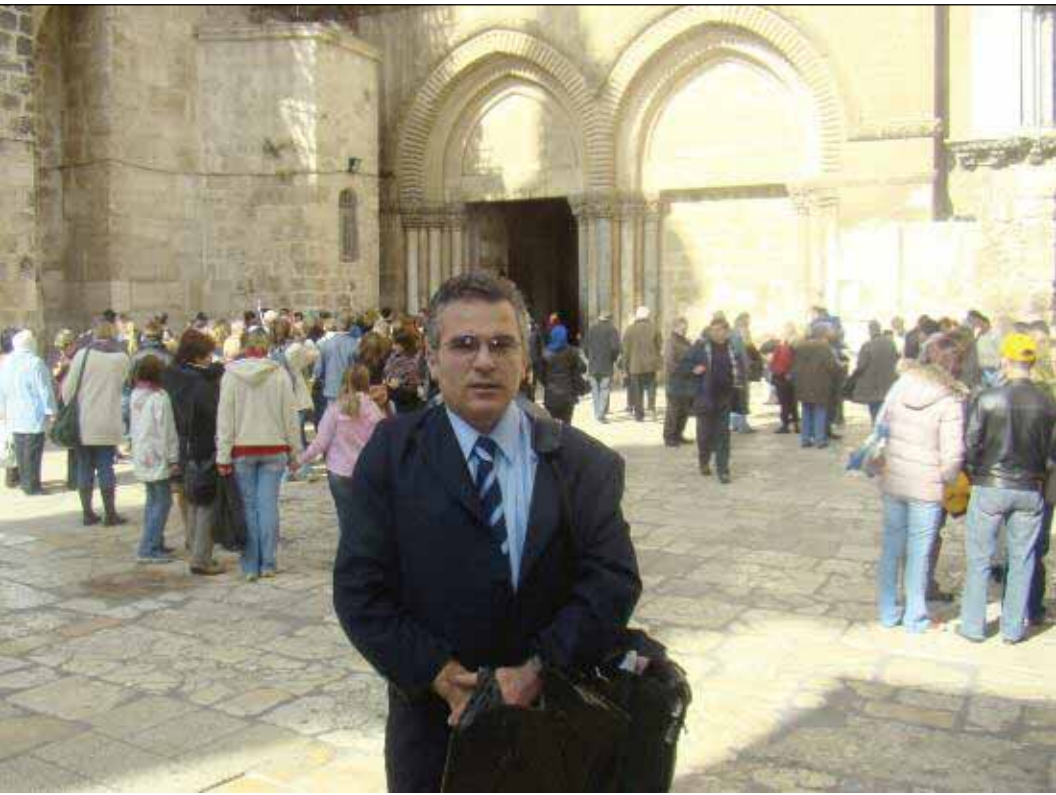
of Christian pilgrims come here to visit. Like them we visit the nine stops that Jesus made on his way to the crucifixion, starting from the first station, where Pilate ordered death for the "Prince of Peace." We follow the itinerary to Calvary, so extraordinarily described in scores of movies, books, paintings and other forms of art. The itinerary ends at the place where Jesus was crucified and where today the Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands.

It is here that millions of Christian pilgrims end their emotional tour. The place is also called by them Golgotha or the Hill of Calvary. Here Jesus was crucified according to the New Testament, and this was the place where Jesus was laid to rest.

As we come closer to the church we see that we have to stand in a long line of visitors from all over the world, waiting



With Israeli soldiers at Via Dolorosa (Road of Suffering) in old City of Jerusalem, believed to be the route that Jesus took between his condemnation by Pilate and his crucifixion.



In front of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

to get inside.

Its great symbolic importance aside, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre also serves as the headquarters of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. As if to make a point that the church does not belong to him alone, other Christians (Roman Catholics, Protestants, etc.) have their offices in the same building.

The entrance is the place where Jesus Christ was placed before burial. People bow and kiss the ground with tearful emotion. It is understandable that for the devoted Christian

who traveled many miles to visit this place, feelings are overwhelming. They grow up learning about this place and now they are here. They breathe the same air that Jesus did. Needless to say, they will remember this moment for their entire lives.

Some of Jerusalem had ended covered in garbage, when the first Christian emperor of Rome ordered that the location be cleaned up and then asked the Bishop of Jerusalem to build a church on that spot.

His mother directed the construction and she is believed to have found the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

She is known today, by the Christians, as Saint Helena, while the church that she and her son built is known both as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but also as the Church of the Resurrection, a symbol of the celebration of the life of Jesus Christ. Mother and son also built the Eastern Church in Bethlehem to commemorate the beginning of Jesus' journey.

The children of Abraham living in the land of the prophets

Before visiting the Farthest Mosque (Al-Aqsa) and the Dome of the Rock, our guides have arranged a meeting with representatives of Jerusalem Peacemakers. We meet the religious director of this association, located in a Muslim religious center (belonging to a Sufi sect) on Via Dolorosa. *Shaykh* Abd Al-Aziz Bukhari is the owner of the building. His forefathers emigrated from Bukhara in Central Asia in 1616. (He died in 2010).

He is the leader of the Uzbek Muslim community of Jerusalem and a dedicated activist for Jerusalem Peacemakers, whose goals are to contribute to the progress of peace, jus-



Shaykh Abd Al-Aziz Bukhari (right), the leader of the Uzbek community of Jerusalem and activist in the Jerusalem Peacemakers, with Stephen Sylejman Schwartz, author, executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism in Washington, D.C.

tice, and reconciliation, working for a dignified life for all the people of the Holy Land.

His main question is: why do Christians, Muslims and Jews fight each other, when only three percent of their scriptures differ from one other? Why don't they concentrate instead on the 97 percent of similarity and take it from there?

It is another version of the same question that I have been asking myself for some time now and which was emphasized during my trip to the Holy Land. The similarities between the Jews and the Arabs are surprising. To mention just a few, they

both read and write from the right to the left, they both refuse to eat pork; they both pray several times a day (three times for the Jews and five for the Arabs); males from both sides put a hat on when they pray while women cover their heads; in both cases, men and women pray separately and they speak related languages.

Sitting in a chair near his Jewish friend, Eliyahu McLean, with whom he works tirelessly to encourage interreligious dialogue, Bukhari asks: *If at the end of time, everyone will love everyone, why wait until then?*

"Guns, knives and hate in the heart should not be allowed in the City of Jerusalem," he said. "Also, every politician who uses hate for political gains should be denied entry to the City."

Because of his brave and moderate thoughts, he had been attacked physically just a few days before our meeting, by an unknown person, as he was walking in the street. He has asked many times to participate in the *Hajj*, but the Saudi government has continually denied him a visa.

"Jerusalem was a holy city even before Muhammad," he says. "The city was destined to become a place to pray from the time of Abraham. God advised Abraham (Ibrahim), the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, to build a holy place exactly where today stands the Al-Aqsa mosque. Later he and his son Ismail built the Ka'aba in Mecca."

"Muslims believe that the gates of paradise are located above Jerusalem and that is why God brought Muhammad here first and then took him to paradise. That is why all of humanity will be judged in Jerusalem," adds *Shaykh* Bukhari, who is among dozens of leading Orthodox rabbis and *shaykhs* holding interfaith meetings in recent years to help underscore



Eliyahu McLean talks with the author of this book about his mission to encourage interreligious dialogue in Israel.

common values and hopes.

Eliyahu McLean, who often travels around the world trying to win support for this mission of peace, is optimistic for the chances of creating harmony and peace among people who are now hostile to one another in the holy land. His mission is, nevertheless, difficult.

"People ask me whether I belong to the right wing or the left wing, but I respond that you need both wings if you want to fly. We have to focus on what unites us," he says.

"When I go to the Jewish *Shabbat* celebrations in the West

Bank my leftist friends get nervous and then the next day when I spend the day with Palestinian peace activists in Bethlehem my friends among the Hebrew community in Jerusalem get nervous," he says.

For someone who wants to build bridges among religions, Eliyahu has a meaningful background. His mother is a Jew from Brooklyn, while his father was a Christian, the son of a Baptist minister. According to his biography "his parents, flower-children of the 1960s, met in California. They raised McLean in Sant Mat, a mystical branch of Sikhism on the Hawaiian Island, Oahu. Then, his first name was Olan, akin to the Norse god, Olaf. They gave their son the Punjabi middle name, 'Charanamarit', meaning 'the pool of nectar at the feet of the Lord.' "

He began searching for his own spiritual identity from a very early age.

"I could connect with the universal teachings of Sant Mat but I wanted a connection with my own heritage", he said.

"When I was twelve, I discovered Judaism when I went to a friend's *bar mitzvah* in a Reform temple. The moment I walked in, something resounded deep within me, and I knew I'd come home. I made every effort to learn enough Hebrew so that I, too, could be called up to read from the Torah. My mother's father, Oscar, flew in from New York for my *bar mitzvah* and bestowed upon me the most precious gift, my Hebrew name, Eliyahu," he said.

According to their bulletin, "What sets these little-known peace efforts apart from the rest of Israel's peace camp is a focus on religion, rather than politics, as the basis for dialogue and negotiation. Mainstream activists are largely secular."

The religious peace camp hopes to change the stereotype that religion is against coexistence. Setting the tone for new definitions of Jewish-Arab cooperation, they often refer to themselves as “the children of Abraham living in the land of the prophets.”

Visiting the famous mosques

After this conversation we depart to visit the Islamic monuments, the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. I would not have the company of my fine Jewish guides here as they politely told me that it was forbidden to them to approach those mosques and they would wait to meet us two hours later by one of the eight gates of Jerusalem.

At the entrance some people started interviewing me to see whether I was “a Muslim.” It is the rule: “If you are a Muslim, welcome, if you are not Muslim then turn around. There is no reason for you to be here.”

It is forbidden by their own spiritual authorities for religious Jews to step on the Temple Mount, but it is also prohibited for non-Muslims to enter Al-Aqsa, a rule that began to be applied from the time of the first *Intifada*, a Palestinian uprising that began in the late ‘80s. By contrast, most mosques around the world invite non-Muslims to enter them. Aharon Yahav, our tour guide, says that an American woman who tried a few months ago to enter *Al-Haram ash-Sharif*, was not allowed to do so.

Fortunately *Shaykh* Bukhari volunteered to come with us and he personally knew some of the people who were interrogating me. However, it didn’t help much.

“Do you know *Qur’an*?” one of them asked prodding me to



In front of the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem.

recite verses.

I recited a few, but I did not impress a couple of them.

"You are not a Muslim. You are not allowed to enter the mosque," one of them told me, speaking nervously.

Shaykh Bukhari explained to them where I was coming from and that there was no reason to believe that I was not a Muslim, but to no avail.

My performance, reciting verses from *Qur'an* in Arabic (a language I cannot speak at all) was not sufficient. However, I

was persistent. I did not budge. *Shaykh* Bukhari repeated his efforts to make them understand that they were denying a Muslim who had come to live in America the possibility to visit these two important mosques. Ten more long minutes passed and we were finally allowed to enter.

In front of us appeared the Dome of the Rock, in all its glory, right there on the Temple Mount. Near to it, was the Farthest Mosque (Al-Aqsa). This site features significantly in Islam, with Muhammad and his followers praying by turning towards its direction, until Allah told him to turn towards the Ka'aba in Mecca instead.

Destroyed twice by earthquakes, the Islamic structures on the Temple Mount were even turned into a church by victorious crusaders at one point. Salah-ud-Din won it back for the Arabs and returned it to its initial function. The Arabs still control it. Unlike the rest of the city, it is a Palestinian *waqf* that is the highest authority when it comes to any decision regarding *al-Haram ash-Sharif* or "the Noble Sanctuary" (Al-Aqsa plus the Dome of the Rock).

The yard, the walls and everything that your eye may capture are made of stone. We enter the Dome. It is so large you can barely see the end. The faithful are praying everywhere. An imam is preaching loudly to a group of women. His is the only voice that can be heard. Others seem deep in their prayers, facing the right way and murmuring in silence. I don't speak Arabic and I can't know what the imam is saying. This is not much different from what goes on in my country or in our Albanian diaspora around the world where Albanians have built their mosques. Most of the believers don't understand Arabic. They hear a prayer they can't understand. They pray



View from inside of the Farthest Mosque (Al-Aqsa) in Jerusalem.

and speak to God but they don't know what they say.

As we exit, we start walking towards Al-Aqsa mosque, which is very near the Dome of the Rock. Here too we greet and meet people who go in and out, pray or just converse with each other. I start talking to two of them and then I ask them straightforwardly in English whether they believe that true peace is possible in the Middle East, or between the Palestinians and Israel. They shake their heads and they smile ironically. The answer is in their mimicry.

The Al-Aqsa mosque has also been a target of violence. An extremist Israeli group had planned its destruction but they were discovered, exposed and arrested by the Israeli police and security forces. This group saw the destruction of the famous mosque as the only way for the reconstruction of the Jewish Temple that was destroyed centuries ago.

In the morning of August 21, 1969, a fire broke out in the Al-Aqsa mosque, spreading to the southeastern side of the building. The fire destroyed a 1,000-year-old *minbar*, made of wood and ivory that had been sent reportedly by Salah-ud-Din from Aleppo. An investigation by the Israeli police exposed Michael Dennis Rohan, a tourist from Australia, as an arsonist with an agenda. He was arrested two days after the blaze and was charged with having started the fire in the mosque.

Rohan was a Protestant believer from an evangelical sect known as the Church of God. According to what he admitted in front of a judge, he hoped that by setting the mosque on fire the return of Messiah in the world would be accelerated. He proclaimed that he was sent on a mission by God. He was declared insane and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital before being deported from Israel.

The Temple Mount is so important to Judaism, Christianity and Islam that it has become by default the most controversial and contested religious site in the entire world. Not only the history and the narratives but also the physical locations of these religions' crucially important, if not holy, places overlap.

According to the Bible, Jesus went there to pray but when he saw that the traders had turned it into a market he started overturning their tables. He rebuked them for having

degraded that holy place. "This should be a place of prayer and not a thieves' market!" he said, according to the Bible. He also predicted that one day the Temple would be destroyed.

Today, some Christian preachers believe that the Temple will be rebuilt when Christ returns to the Earth.

According to Judaism, prayer is not allowed in the sacred area on the Mount, and therefore the Jews pray at the temple wall (the Western Wall). Some Jews pray facing the rock that is situated under Dome of the Rock, while the Muslims above pray with their backs toward the rock and their faces turned towards Mecca.

A rain had just stopped when we neared the Tunnel near the Western Wall (known also as the Wailing Wall). This is an underground tunnel which reveals the sacred wall in its entire length. The tunnel is adjacent to the Western Wall and goes under the buildings of the Old City of Jerusalem. The construction work to open the tunnel began in 1967, after Israel's triumph in the Six Day War, and continued for twenty years. In the process, facts, previously unknown, about the geography of Temple Mount were discovered, including streets and monumental buildings from the Herodian epoch. A few feet inside the tunnel there is a small synagogue called The Cave.

To facilitate the circulation of numerous tourists through the tunnel, the government of Israel decided in 1996 to open an exit for the tunnel into the Via Dolorosa. Yasser Arafat interpreted this decision as a plan to demolish part of *Al-Haram ash-Sharif*.

His declaration prompted violent clashes in which 70 Palestinians and 16 Israeli soldiers were killed. The process went ahead nevertheless, eventually opening an important exit for



Jewish prayers at the Tunnel near the Western Wall.

the tunnel, without any damage to the mosques. Since then the tourists can enter from the southern side near the Western Wall, walk through the tunnel with the help of a guide and exit on the northern side of it.

About 10 p.m. we exit the tunnel near the Western Wall. It is also known as the Wailing Wall, a name which may have been inspired by the droves of Jews traditionally coming here to mourn the double destruction of their Holy Temple by the Babylonians and the Roman Empire. In recent decades, some



Touching the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) in Jerusalem.

Muslim Arabs have rejected any essential relationship of this wall with Judaism. In December 1973, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia said that “only the Muslims and the Christians have holy places and rights in Jerusalem.” As for the Western Wall, he cynically added that another wall can be built for the Jews and “they can pray there.”

Jewish Law expects the believers to feel grief when they see the Western Wall standing but the site of the holiest Temple desolated. Those who have not seen the Wall for more than 30



Mimar Sinan (1490-1588)

days should recite: *"Our Holy Temple, which was our glory, in which our forefathers praised You, was burned and all of our delights were destroyed."*

The Jews have prayed in this place three times a day for thousands of years. "To Jerusalem, to the City, with pleasure we shall return" and they have repeated the oath of the *Psalms*: *"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill."*

The Jews were praying at the Wall that January night. Following the ritual a simple small barrier divided women from men as they prayed. The ritual requires

also for men to put on a Jewish skullcap. I took a cap too, put it on my head and went ahead in line with the others and touched the Wall.

The organized forms of the prayers had started with an order by an Ottoman Sultan, Suleyman the Magnificent. It was then that a special plaza was built by the Western Wall, where the Jews could pray. The architect who designed it was the famous Mimar Sinan, who according to many research studies was an Albanian (as were many other talented professionals in the Ottoman Empire).

Known as one of the world's greatest geniuses of his profession, Sinan was already in the City, working on the Damascus

Gate, when he received the order from the Sultan. The famous architect dug the ground to deepen the space in front of the Western Wall and used the now extended area for the plaza with enough room for a growing number of Jews going there to pray. Sinan also erected an additional wall meant to separate the area from the Mughrabi quarter so that the Jewish believers would pray without being disturbed by the rest of the City.

This construction by Sinan, the famous architect (who among other works is also highly praised for building the Suleymaniye, one of the most famous mosques in Istanbul), has been vital to the Jewish efforts to keep alive the tradition of pilgrims and prayers in large numbers near the Western Wall.

The next day, after spending almost half an hour going through security, we enter the Knesset, the Parliament of Israel. Here we will meet two members of Israel's legislative body. They are Ami Ayalon from the Labor Party (center-left) and Yuli – Yoel Edelstein, from the Likud Party (center-right).

The building of the parliament is situated in Givat Ram, which was inhabited by Arabs before 1948. The construction of the building was sponsored by James A. DeRothschild as a gift for the new state of Israel.

Israel is a parliamentary democracy where the executive and the legislative powers are clearly divided. The government, led by the Prime Minister, is responsible for executive duties. Knesset is the highest legislative body of Israel. The head of the state is the President, whose duties are more on the representative level.

Members of the Knesset are chosen every four years, unless

there is a political crisis. When I was visiting, Kadima (Forward) was the party with the most members of parliament, 29 of them. It was founded as a centrist party by Ariel Sharon, a dominant figure in Israeli politics.

According to the political platform of Kadima, it is important that the state of Israel remain a Jewish state, and therefore it is necessary to abandon any ambition toward inclusion of territories with Arab majorities. Those territories could be allowed to form their own state. The vision for this was to be a demilitarized state where the terrorists would agree to give up using heavy weapons and violence and accept and guarantee the state of Israel and the security of its borders and population.

Sharon abandoned the rightist Likud party because they did not agree with the displacements of the Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip.

Also during my visit, both the President and the Prime Minister of Israel belonged to Kadima party. Eighteen political parties allied in twelve lists had Knesset members, in a parlia-



The Knesset Building in Jerusalem.

ment of only 120 seats. The deep divisions among the various political parties are the main reason why Israel still does not have a constitution today.

Eighteen political parties are too many for a country of this size. It reminded me of Albanian politics. Political parties keep mushrooming making it more and more difficult to build coalitions to run the country properly.

A first impression would give you the idea that this parliament could never function and no government would ever win a vote of confidence; however, history shows that it works pretty well against all the odds.

Israel held legislative elections on February 2009 and the composition of the Knesset changed from what it was when I visited the country a year before. Kadima is still the party with the most members (28) but the center-right Likud dominates now with its 27 members and the support that it received from nationalist and religious parties.

It is interesting that the Central Elections Committee tried to ban two of the three Arab parties from taking part in these elections for their disloyalty to the State and their support of Israel's enemies.

The imposed ban was overturned by the Israeli Supreme Court, which, by a vote of eight to one, allowed the parties to participate. United Arab List-Ta'al and Balad, won, respectively, four and three seats in the new Knesset. Three more seats went to a third, probably more mainstream Arab party (Hadash).

So diverse is the political mosaic of Israel that there is also a sect called Neturei Karta ("Guardians of the City"), known also by the English name Jews United Against Zionism. This

party wants to dismantle the State of Israel, as according to them the Jews cannot build a state of their own until the Messiah comes to Earth. Some of their members are also present in New York.

We met first with Ami Ayalon, a member with influence in the parliamentary group of the Labor Party, who says that he supports the creation of a Palestinian state, but that the Palestinians should be able to present a clear vision of what kind of state they want and will build. In his rich political and professional career Ayalon had been the head of Shin Bet, Israel's secret service, and commander-in-chief of the Navy; today, however, he has lost his political clout since he broke with his party and lost his parliamentary seat in the last elections.

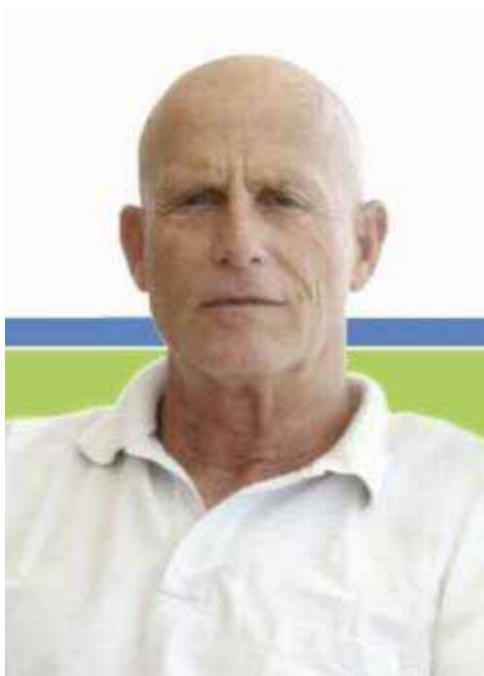
"We have been mistaken in the past, by saying that we should avoid talking in detail about the future, to avoid painful details and harm the current peace negotiations," says Ayalon. "However, if the Palestinians really hope and believe in diplomacy they should be against Hamas.

"Israel will have security when the Palestinians find hope," he says.

The Labor deputy, who received a Masters in Public Administration from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, explains to us that force cannot solve the problems.

"I understood this well, when I was serving in the army," he says.

To illustrate the depth of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he uses as an example the words said to him by a Palestinian friend: "We consider it a victory only when we see you suffering."



Ami Ayalon



Yuli – Yoel Edelstein

On June 25, 2003, Ayalon launched, together with the Palestinian professor Sari Nusseibeh, a peace initiative called “The People’s Voice.” The goal of the initiative is to collect as many signatures of Israelis and Palestinians as possible for peace guidelines supporting a two-state solution, without the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Nevertheless, over the years he has grown pessimistic about the chances of true peace in the region.

After explaining that Jews are too divided on how to solve the problem, he told us about an American official who visited Israel a few years ago and after a short time was trying hard to understand the roots of Middle East conflicts and problems.

"We have been living here for 5,000 years now and we still do not understand much," Ayalon had told him. "How can you hope to understand it in a few days?"

We thanked Ayalon for his time and sat to talk with Yuli – Yoel Edelstein, who had been a dissident in the Soviet Union. He was born in Ukraine and had spent three and a half years in a labor camp in difficult conditions, where he was seriously maimed. He later immigrated to Israel where he soon became involved in politics with other former dissidents from Russia.

A few years earlier they had joined the Likud Party, the main political force of the center-right in Israel's parliament. Edelstein was then a minister in the broad coalition that ruled the country.

So what did he think about the problems in Israel? Did he believe peace was possible?

"Now there are no real chances for solving the conflict," he responds briefly, adding that it depends on the Palestinians whether they want a state for themselves or not.

"No Palestinian leader has openly said that he accepts the existence of Israel," he says.

I was interested in his position on Kosova, which had not yet declared independence then, but all the signs were clear that the culmination of that process was very near.

In 1999, however, then still a member of the Likud Party, Ariel Sharon, the Foreign Minister of Israel had criticized the intervention of NATO against Milosevic's Yugoslavia and had spoken against the independence of Kosova.

Edelstein paused a little. The question had been a little unexpected to him.

"If the Kosovars are able to govern themselves well and

build a viable state, I don't mind the change, but I am afraid that there are foreign extremist Islamic groups operating there and that independence will strengthen them."

I told him the Kosovars are progressive and moderate Muslims with no tolerance for religious extremism. He did not comment on my explanations and a little later we exchanged our greetings and the meeting ended.

In the offices of the Foreign Ministry of Israel we meet with Majalli Whbee, then Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel and Deputy Speaker of the Knesset. With him is Bahij Mansour, Director of the Department for Interreligious Affairs.

Majalli Whbee belongs to a religious sect known as the Druze, a variant of Islam that is not accepted as such by many other Muslims. The sect exists as a national and religious minority in several countries of the Middle East, most notably in Lebanon.

The Druze are proud of their long tradition as warriors and in the recent conflicts in the Middle East those living in Israel have taken its side, while Lebanese Druze are anti-Israel. They are one of the many non-Jewish minorities in Israel.

Relatively improbable circumstances came a few years ago when the President of Israel had resigned and the Speaker of the Parliament was abroad for a tour of several days. As the number two in the Knesset, Majalli Whbee took charge and became acting President of Israel. This was the first time in history that a non-Jewish political leader, representing a minority, fulfilled the duties of the President of Israel.

"Do you know what is happening?" Whbee asks and then answers his own question: "We have for 100 years now been in conflict with the Arab world, we have had a peace agree-



Majalli Whbee, then Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, (third from left) during the meeting with visitors from the United States where he spoke about the challenges facing Israel.

ment with Egypt and we want peace with Palestine. We want negotiations instead of fear and violence. The majority of the Israelis believe in the peace process. The question is do the Palestinians really want it?"

According to Whbee, the Palestinians' main mistake was to have again launched their *Intifada*. "It was hurtful to all the sides. We all paid heavily for it," Whbee said. "Many civilians died in 132 suicide attacks. Nevertheless, the dialogue with the Palestinians has never been interrupted. The most recent conference was organized and took place in Annapolis and it remains a good foundation to achieve an agreement."

Every Israeli official that we met broached the issue of Iran.

Majalli Whbee too is very concerned about the Iranian position towards Israel. The Iranian leader has promised publicly the annihilation of the state of Israel and is currently sponsoring fundamentalist groups that are serious obstacles to peace in the region and a real threat to the security of Israel and its people. It seems that this activity has only increased after September 11, 2001.

Mr. Whbee spoke for more than 40 minutes and seemed a bit tired in the end. He was sweating and ordered one of his assistants to open the window. He touched on a wide range of delicate issues that are important to Israel, and wanted us to have an informed understanding of the positions that his state has taken.

Among many questions, I returned to my favorite topic, the position of Israel on the issue of Kosova. "Will you recognize its independence?" I asked Mr. Whbee.

He did not seem to expect the question. He looked towards his advisers probably for a hint of help and after seeing no sign of it, turned to me and said: "Honestly, I don't know the position of my government on Kosova."

At that moment one of his assistants intervened and asked me for my contact information, promising to send a written position of the Foreign Ministry of Israel on the issue.

I never received it; however, from the media it seems that the position of Israel on Kosova will remain: "not among the first, but not among the last" to recognize the independence of the new state.

I spoke briefly to Mr. Whbee about why no country should feel threatened by the independence of Kosova, about the traditional friendship between Jews and Albanians, about the



Majalli Whbee (fourth from left) with the visitors in an Israeli government building.

rescue of the Jews in Albania during the Holocaust, and in the end gave him a copy of the book *Rescue in Albania* by Harvey Sarner.

I was generally surprised by the lack of information and of a clear vision on Kosova both during our meetings in the Knesset and in the Foreign Ministry. Public opinion in Israel also seems to have little understanding of the Kosova conflict.

This is a stark contrast on the same issue with the Jewish community in America, which has a much better understanding of who the Albanians are and what has happened and is happening in Kosova.

Very significantly, the first U.S. politician who raised the

issue of the suffering and discrimination in Kosova was the late U.S. Senator Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor and an advocate of human rights all over the world. Encouraged by former U.S. Congress member Joseph DioGuardi, Lantos was also the first U.S. politician to visit Albania after the collapse of Communism and the first to ask for information about the rescue of the Jewish community in Albania during WWII.

The Kosova War was described as "Madeleine's War," after Madeleine Albright, who revealed her Jewish roots rather late in her life. Senator Joseph Lieberman, the first American Jew to run for Vice-President, has been also a strong supporter of the cause of the Albanians in Kosova and of Kosova's independence.

Not accidentally, the co-chairman of the Albanian Caucus in the U.S. Congress is a distinguished American Jewish member, Eliot Engel, a strong advocate for Albanian rights in Balkans.

The Albanian-American Women's Organization is also led by an Albania-born American Jew, Dr. Anna Kohen, whose parents were Holocaust survivors.

One of the reasons why the Jewish community in U.S. is much better informed about the Albanian case in the Balkans is that a great relationship exists between the Albanian-American community and the American Jewish community. Two hard working, successful communities with a past of suffering and a great appreciation for the United States of America, which became a new home to them. A relationship best seen in the greatest city in the world, New York City.

It is important to include here a few words on Congressman Eliot Engel who, in the late 80s, learned about the situation

of the Albanians in the Balkans and has become since then a great advocate of human rights and democratic changes in the Southeast Europe.

His support for the self-determination of the Kosovar people, the integration of Albania in NATO and the progress in human rights wherever Albanians live from Montenegro to Macedonia has been a great help and has earned him a great respect from Albanian-Americans.

It was thanks to his initiative that a resolution was introduced in the House of Representatives in 2005, with the words: "Commending the people of the Republic of Albania on the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II for protecting and saving the lives of the majority of Jews living in Albania during the Holocaust."

Meaningfully, the resolution was co-sponsored by 17 other Representatives, a number of which, like Engel, were Jewish-Americans.

When I think of the Albanian, Jewish and American people, Eliot Engel easily comes to mind, for his personal contribution in forging this triangle of friendship.

The highlight of this friendship was the help of the American Jewish Committee during the Kosova War, when the U.S.-led NATO military intervention saved the Albanians of Kosova from a humanitarian catastrophe. The military and paramilitary forces of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic were repeating the Bosnian scenario in Kosova, with extreme violence exerted upon the unarmed civilian population. Bombing Yugoslavia became the only option on the table after months of negotiations fell through.

In the process, Milosevic forcibly expelled hundreds of

thousands of Albanians beyond the borders of Kosova, implementing the plan designed in 1937 by Vaso Cubrilovic, who urged the Serbs to follow the example of the Germans and "cleanse" Kosova of its Albanian population. Cubrilovic had become fashionable again in the nationalist years of Milosevic rule.

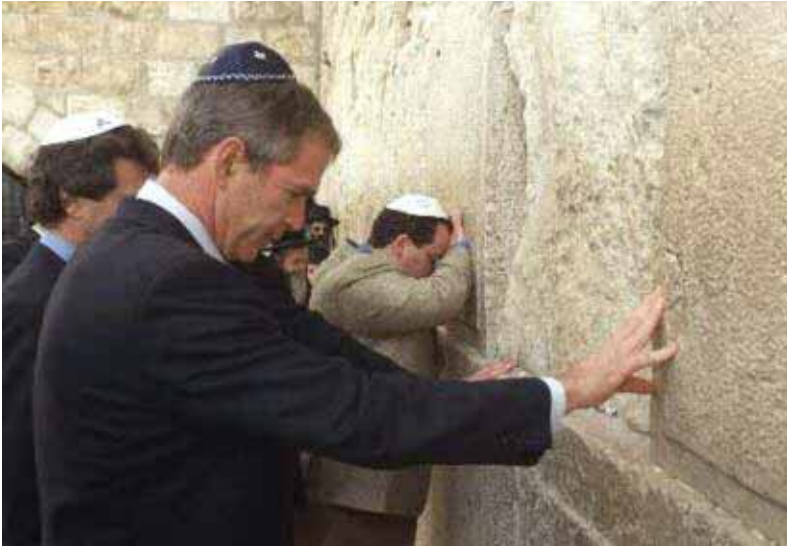
Not only did the American Jewish Committee publicly support the military intervention of NATO with at least two press releases (24 March 1999 and 13 April 1999), but they also launched an aid campaign to help the war refugees, who had been expelled from their homes by Milosevic forces.

Their declarations were published as full page ads in well-known American periodicals, such as *The New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *The New Republic*. A high-level AJC delegation traveled to Albania and Macedonia to study the Kosovar refugee crisis, learn about their needs and to show solidarity and support for them.

Eventually more than \$1.2 million was raised by the AJC aid campaign. Albanians of every religion, but also Muslims all over the world should recognize this great humanitarian gesture.

President Bush visits Israel - his position on a Palestinian state is questioned

The third day we were in Israel. George W. Bush, then President of the United States, was visiting the country and the event had dominated the press for the past two days. Among news and comments written by journalists there are also many statements published as paid advertisements. Some of them certainly attracted my attention.



President George W. Bush during his visit to the Western Wall in January 2008.

As an illustration, one appeared on the cover page of *The Jerusalem Post* (it occupied almost a quarter of the page, most visibly). The title was: "*President Bush, How did we lose you?*" Here is the full text:

"In your December 1998 visit here you told us that some of your driveways in Texas were longer than Israel's 9-mile, pre-1967 waistline.

"In January 2008, you have returned to urge our retreat to that same indefensible border, one that would make our entire coastal population hostage to the guns and rockets of our sworn enemies.

"After 9/11, you and your advisers embraced the added value a strong, democratic Israeli ally brought to America's valiant struggle against radical Islam.

"In 2008, you ask that same ally to discard its most critical territorial assets, truncate Jerusalem, its capital, and become complicit in the creation of a sovereign jihadist entity in Judea and Samaria.

"Mr. President, the Palestinian Authority, its Fatah and Tanzim gunmen and Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigades haven't the slightest intention of living 'side-by-side in peace' with Israel. Their leaders – including Mahmoud Abbas – have categorically rejected the very existence of a Jewish state in their midst.

"Mr. Bush, why are you pressuring a weak and extremely unpopular Olmert government to place Israel in the direst jeopardy it has ever known? Why would you render meaningless the blood America has shed in the battle against radical Islam by handing radical Islam the incomparable gift of a jihadist state in the Land of Israel?"

"Mr. President, the Nation of Israel lives. We will not abandon our legacy!"

The paid advertisement is signed by a former ambassador, a former minister, several authors and publishers, and is sponsored by Just Peace for Israel.

Another paid advertisement, published as a full page and sponsored by the Unity Coalition for Israel is titled: *"Can Israel - divided in half and a few miles wide - survive global Islamist terrorism?"* It makes use of the same early quote from President Bush and asks: "President Bush, How would you defend a country nine miles wide?"

In the same issue, there is another full page paid advertisement. It contains a very short text: *"Welcome President Bush! Eight thousand settlers want to return to their homes!"*

There is also a message directed to President Bush and signed by 350 rabbis. Here is a quote from that message: "Why do you support the creation of another terrorist state in the region? Why does America promote a state for the friends of Saddam, Bin Laden and Ahmadinejad?"

President Bush, who often expressed himself in the favor of a Palestinian state that would exist in peace, side by side with Israel, repeated his position during this visit as he met with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. He ended his visit by promising to work until the last day of his presidential mandate for the peace in the Middle East.

It was the first visit of President Bush to Israel since he had become President seven years before. The visit was followed by many street protests. Right-wingers protested because they considered Bush's peace plan an offense to Israel's rights.

"Right-wing movements thought that this week's visit by U.S. President George W. Bush would be the perfect opportunity to press their campaign for maintaining a united Jerusalem under Jewish control," *The Jerusalem Post* reported.

On the other hand, left-wingers, joined by some Israeli Arabs, were protesting because they saw Bush as a promoter of the rightists in Israel.

"Bush totally and blindly adopts Israel's most extreme positions and prevents progress toward a final-status agreement. Without international pressure on the government of Israel, there won't be progress in the peace process," another newspaper, *Haaretz*, quoted Muhammad Barakeh, the leader of Hadash, a joint Jewish and Arab socialist party, as he spoke in one of these protests. It meant something that the Arabs

were demonstrating freely in Israel against the leader of the Free World. They enjoy political rights in Israel that they would not in many Arab countries.

I was more surprised by the Israeli Jews' demonstrations against President Bush. No country in the world does so much for Israel as the United States does. I understand that many in Israel may not agree with the compromises that American diplomacy is pressing, but I thought that the street protests and the advertisements, even if limited, were in poor taste.

There is no free society without free media. What is the situation of the media today in the lands where the Palestinians live? No one can answer this better than Khaled Abu Toameh, the Palestinian reporter who works currently for *The Jerusalem Post*.

"There is no free media in Palestine," he told me during our meeting in Jerusalem. "There was no free media under Arafat and there is no free media now. During the time of Arafat 350 Palestinian journalists were killed."

It was in the Palestinian territories that Abu Toameh began his journalistic career. An expert on Israeli-Palestinian affairs and former member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, he started as a translator in the movement led by Arafat and later became a correspondent. As his professional ambitions evolved, however, they clashed with the lack of freedom of speech that exists in the Palestinian territories. He says he found his freedom by working today for *The Jerusalem Post*. He tells us as a joke that they respect his freedom in the *JP* so much that they would not even correct his spelling errors.

For someone who worked for PLO he has little respect for the founder and the historic leader of that movement, Yasser



Khaled Abu Toameh, the Palestinian reporter who currently works for *The Jerusalem Post*.

Arafat. He says that the Palestinian leader was a corrupt man. His wife used to receive a salary of 100,000 dollars per month and lived a luxurious life in Paris, while many Palestinians in the territories were dying of hunger.

"The situation is no better today," he adds. "Three months after the death of Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas promised to eliminate corruption if the Palestinians would vote for him. And what happened? Abbas surrounded himself with the same Arafat's old vultures while the situation grew worse."

About 400 Palestinians had died recently in clashes between Fatah and Hamas. "The divisions are so deep. With whom do you talk if you want to negotiate peace?" says Abu Toameh, author of numerous articles from the Gaza Strip and

the West Bank and producer of many documentaries that have been broadcast by BBC, American, Australian, Danish and Swedish television.

The role of Abu Toameh shows the diversity of Israeli public life. This was reinforced when we attended a very interesting panel discussion titled "Israel: A land of many faiths." It included the participation of three distinguished representatives from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious communities. They were, respectively: Rabbi David Rosen, Sister Carmen Farrugia and *Shaykh* Abd al-Aziz Bukhari.

Formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland, Rabbi Rosen is the Chairman of IJCIC, the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations, a broad-based coalition of Jewish organizations representing world Jewry to other religions.

Rabbi David Rosen has been recognized for his extraordinary contribution in the reconciliation between Jews and Catholics, by Pope Benedict XVI who conferred a papal knighthood on him.

He is the first Orthodox rabbi and also the first Israeli in history to have received this title. Rabbi David Rosen has also held several high positions in the religious hierarchy in Israel, in America and in South Africa.

He has his own witty way of describing the divisions between the Jews themselves when it comes to the vision of the future of their country and their region. "Two Jews, three opinions," he likes to say.

"We are all descendants of Abraham. We are the same family that has been extended for thousands of years," Rabbi Rosen says during the debate. "Our long resistance along the difficult path that we have taken demonstrates the love of God



A photo with three leaders from different religions, respectively Christian, Jewish and Muslim: From left, Sister Carmen Farrugia, Rabbi David Rosen, the author of this book and *Shaykh* Abd Al-Aziz Bukhari.

in all of us." He adds, "we have made our share of mistakes by not respecting the 613 commandments written in our holy book, the Torah," which remains today the most important text in Judaism.

"However, God has given us another chance and we are in this situation today. Our future depends on how we read and respect these commandments. They are crucial for our existence," says Rabbi Rosen, adding that Judaism is closer to Islam than to any other religion.

After him spoke Sister Carmen Farrugia, chairwoman of the Interfaith Encounter Association and General Secretary of the Union of the Religious Superiors in the Holy Land, which

includes Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Cyprus. Her speech was dedicated to interreligious co-existence. She spoke about tolerance towards each other and the efforts that everyone should make to understand those who we see as different.

Sr. Farrugia was born in Malta and is a member of the Sisters of Zion. She teaches Biblical and Modern Hebrew.

Shaykh Bukhari came a little late, but he was greeted warmly by the visitors from America.

The distinguished cleric began by talking about the walls that divide the Jews and the Muslims. "The wall in our heads is the main obstacle in the road towards peace," he said, speaking about the blocked peace process in the Middle East, where dialogue has been impossible because of the deep mistrust between the sides.

"If people were in agreement, if people trusted each other, governments would have been obliged to act accordingly. However, while the people remain divided, don't expect politicians to act seriously."

He believes that governments, politicians and diplomats should incorporate religious leaders in the dialogue. Improvements would be immediately noticeable, he says.

We were stunned to learn from him that his religious center, founded by his forefathers more than 400 years ago, had just been usurped by Wahhabis, who he said, infiltrated into Israel with ample material means to attain their destructive goals.

At the end of our meeting we bid farewell to these religious representatives but we remain together with them in our prayers for peace in the Holy Land.

Sderot and Netiv Haasara, or life under the threat of the missiles

When our guide told us that after the meeting with the religious representatives we would travel to the border with the Gaza Strip, visions of blood, violence and terror came to my mind. We would be accompanied in this trip by a retired general, Shalom Harari, who had served in the past as advisor to the Defense Ministry and as chief of the Department of Arab Affairs in Judea and in the Military Administration of Samaria. Today he is a senior research fellow in the International Policy Institute for Counter-terrorism (ICT) and also in the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). He collects information from various sources and his opinions have a lot of weight among those who decide on anti-terrorist policies.

To understand Mr. Harari consider this paragraph from *The New Yorker*: "Harari gained a measure of fame in intelligence circles when he began to tell his colleagues in internal reports that Hamas, founded in 1987, and initially a small outgrowth of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, would, with its platform of armed resistance, grassroots politics, and Islamic ideology, come to dominate Palestinian politics. Six years ago, while most of his colleagues were anticipating peace, Harari was rightly predicting a second Intifada; that uprising led to the decline of Yasir Arafat's creation and power base, the Fatah Party."

As we stand at the border of Gaza, in a place called Netiv Haasara near the city of Sderot, the general looks towards the wall that now divides Israel from the Gaza Strip and speaks in a confident tone: "Our generation will not see a true peace



Standing on the border of the Gaza Strip. Ret. General Shalom Harari is holding a Qassam missile fired by Hamas, while talking about security challenges with Nawab Mousvi Agha, chairman of the American Muslim Congress (right), and the author of this book.

agreement." It is a conclusion coming from his long experience with this conflict.

"It is hard to have peace in this place," he says as he holds in his hand what is left from a Qassam missile shot by the Palestinian Hamas, toward this side of the border, which is now made more visible by the wall that divides two hostile sides. A Qassam is a steel rocket filled with explosives, produced by Hamas. It has become a nightmare for the Israelis who live near the border. They are under continuous threat, day and night. The Qassams can strike anytime, anywhere: at home,

in the streets, at school, at work, even in hospitals. Nobody is safe from them. In the past, the Israeli army has responded forcefully, striking targets that it says belong to Hamas, the force accused of producing and using Qassam missiles.

"These missiles are very dangerous. The snake, you know where it may bite you, but with these missiles you never know where they will hit," says the retired general, and he adds that the number of these attacks is increasing and they are getting better and better at this. Understandably, the risks for the Israeli citizens who live near the border are increasing, too.

The state has assigned an exclusive fund to build lodgings for people who live in the houses that are highly exposed to the danger of the missiles.

"Not so long ago, just yesterday, two Palestinian terrorists, a man and a woman, tried to enter our territory," says Hariri. "They were acting as a happy couple in love, but our forces caught them in time and thwarted their devious plan. Their bag was full of explosives."

How were they discovered? The general points towards an object, far up in the air. Seems like a big, plastic balloon. It is a surveillance device that watches over the area. The security forces refer to it whenever they have doubts for movements in the border zone.

During our meeting with the retired general in Netiv Haasara, only a few meters away from the Gaza Strip, he charged that the Palestinians, with these terrorist attacks, are proving that they are not ready for peace. "We moved out of the Gaza Strip, but how did it help the situation? They are back to the old tricks. Even their electricity comes from us, but what we get in return is terror."



Aviva Tessler, founder and director of the organization “Operation Embrace”, which offers aid to those who have been wounded by terrorist attacks in Israel.

We rode along and 30 minutes later, the general told us: “Now we are beyond the first line of danger.”

We are in Sderot, a few miles away from Gaza. It is the city most in danger from the Qassam missiles. From the beginning of the Second *Intifada*, in October 2000, the city has been attacked continually by the missiles of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Thousands of missiles have been launched against this city which is inhabited by 20,000 Israelis. The killings, the wounds and the material damages caused by these missiles have made many inhabitants abandon the city and move to safer areas.

“We live in constant fear,” says Aviva Tessler, founder and director of the organization Operation Embrace, which offers



The visitors from U.S. after the meeting with activists of “Operation Embrace” and victims of terrorism. On the left is Salih Abu Tarif from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

aid to those who have been wounded by terrorist attacks in Israel.

“Thank you for coming to visit us. Thank you very much,” she repeated many times with tears in her eyes. “Only those who come and visit us can understand the terror in which the population of this city lives.”

We later learned that Aviva Tessler and the terror victims, who included a Muslim, were deeply moved that our delegation had come to visit Sderot, since many other people are afraid to do so.

There are many people in her office, men and women, victims of terrorist strikes. One of them is Lior Chiman, who was

wounded in August of the previous year by a missile.

"I was riding in my car when I heard the sirens that warned of danger. When I got out of the car the missile fell not far from me and wounded me in the eye," he says pointing at the left eye.

The city has installed sirens which warn the citizens whenever they detect missiles being fired towards the area. They can help prevent deaths. A teacher who has come to meet us tells about her effort to make sure that the children understand the importance of those sirens and know what to do when they are heard. They know that they will have to make sure their shoe-laces are tied and that they are ready to be directed to run towards the closest refuge. In the past, some missiles have hit schools.

"You can imagine the state of mind with which our kids live," she says adding that many mothers have had to quit their jobs to stay near their traumatized children.

For a few minutes we watch on a big screen sequences from a documentary on the activity of *Operation Embrace*. The organization is doing its best to help the people who have been affected by missile attacks. Most of its workers are volunteers who have come here from America just like its director, Aviva Tessler.

Save a child's heart

We have been in Israel for only a few days, but we have already seen the holy sites and the old city of Jerusalem; we have been in one of the most dangerous zones in Israel; we have met generals, parliamentarians, ministers and clerics. We have not stopped for a minute. It is an unbelievable adven-



The author of this book visiting a child from Gaza recovering after heart surgery in the Wolfson Medical Center in Holon.

ture.

It is a new day today, a January morning in Israel and we are in the city of Azur, in the offices of a humanitarian foundation called Save a Child's Heart (SACH).

We begin the day with tears in our eyes. It is hard not to get emotional when Rachel Lasry Zahavi, a foundation employee, makes a presentation on the activity of this humanitarian institution. As can easily be understood from its name, the foundation's main goal is to save children who suffer from



Dr. Tasneem Shamim, president of the Muslim Women's Coalition in New Jersey (left) Vian S. Akrawi, analyst, in the Office of Homeland Security in Tennessee and Nawab Mousvi Agha, Chairman of the American Muslim Congress talking to a child after his operation in Wolfson Medical Center in Holon.

heart diseases. On the screen we saw sick children with little chance of surviving in their countries, waiting with hope to be brought in Israel where Jewish doctors, some of the best in their fields, would operate on them at no cost.

They come to Israel, frightened and hopeless, in pain and sick, but they return healthy and happy to their countries. Most of them would not have been alive today if it wasn't for this foundation and its beautiful work.

All the medical services for these children in need are



At the headquarters of the humanitarian foundation Save a Child's Heart (SACH) in Azur to where children from all over the world suffering from heart diseases are brought and treated for free. Many of these children were from the Palestinian territories and Arab countries.

offered in a nearby hospital, the Wolfson Medical Center in the city of Holon. There are 70 specialist doctors who have decided to donate their time, expertise, skills and work for free, to the treatment of poor children from relatively under-developed countries.

"Some operations may be complicated and may last more than five hours," says Rachel.

The needs are overwhelming. According to statistics, one in every 100 children is born with a heart problem.



Dr. Akiva Tamir, director of Wolfson Medical Center in Holon with one of his staffers and parents of children who were receiving heart treatment in this center.

The day we visited the offices of SACH, the children being currently treated from heart diseases were: eleven from Iraq, fourteen Palestinians, three from Kenya and five Ethiopians.

After them, there is a list of at least a thousand children, from countries whose health system is not advanced, waiting for the chance to be brought to this hospital.

From 1996, SACH has made possible for 4,500 children from 29 countries all over the world (including Ecuador, China, Vietnam, Russia, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Iraq,

Palestine, Nigeria, Congo, etc.) to go to Israel and have free examinations of their hearts, evaluations of their situations and appropriate treatment, including surgical interventions.

Israel and the Palestinians are involved in a conflict, which very often becomes violent. There is a bridge, however, built upon this humanitarian health service. Forty-five percent of the children that have had heart surgeries sponsored by this foundation at the Wolfson Center are Palestinian. In total, the lives of around 700 Palestinian children, suffering various heart diseases, have been saved by SACH since 1996.

In its noble work, SACH is motivated by an old Jewish tradition, called *Tikkun Olam*. It means "healing the world" or "repairing the world" but it could be also "perfecting the world." By "repairing" the hearts of the sick children, no matter what their religious and ethnic origins, SACH is one of those forces helping to build a better future for this world. Their vision is a future of peace and prosperity for all children everywhere.

In the process, the foundation does many other good deeds. Not only do they bring sick children from poor countries to be treated in Israel, but they also bring doctors from these countries and train them for free so they can go back and help other children in need. At least 50 doctors from many countries of the world have been brought to this hospital to obtain a free specialization in heart surgery. Israeli doctors volunteer to help teach and train these doctors. They make them feel at home during the time they spend in Israel.

SACH's budget reaches \$2 million per year and comes from donations from Jewish sources from all over the world. The foundation also has centers in the United States, United King-



Dr. Amram Cohen, the founder of SACH Foundation, with a Korean child during his visit to Korea, part of his global efforts to help children who lacked opportunities to receive proper health care for their heart problems.

dom, Canada and Germany.

The founder of the SACH Foundations is Dr. Amram Cohen, an excellent surgeon and a great man. With the warmth of his soul, with his dedication to the patients, he became a leader who has inspired humanitarian activities all over the world.

Dr. Cohen was a true idealist. Here is a famous quote from him, directed to young doctors: "I am convinced that for the vast majority of people who chose cardiothoracic surgery as a profession, idealism was initially a strong factor. For those of

you who are reading this and just starting out, hold fast to your 'day-after vision' because, if it fades, despite all the skills acquired, there will be something missing. For those who are searching, join us and together let us make the network to help children with heart disease globally big enough to be equal to the task. There is work for everybody. There are no dollars and cents in it, but it is worth a fortune."

Born in Washington, D.C. and graduating from the University of Virginia, Dr. Cohen worked for 20 years as a surgeon with the United States Army. In 1992, he moved to Israel with his wife and his two children and started to work at the Wolfson Medical Center. Three years later he was asked to travel to Ethiopia to operate on three sick children. When he went there he was stunned by the impossible conditions of the hospital and decided that he could not make his operations in those circumstances. He took the three sick children with him back to Israel where he treated them for free. They were saved and returned healthy to Ethiopia.

From that moment, Dr. Cohen decided to dedicate his life to saving kids with heart problems in poor places of the world and the Save A Child's Heart foundation was founded. The network of professionals and officials who became part of this project was built mostly from his personal contacts. It provided help to children for whom operations were unavailable or too expensive in the countries where they came from. Within a few years SACH became known all over the world.

In 2001, a few days after he had left for a long overdue vacation, the family and the colleagues of Dr. Cohen received horrible news. The noble doctor had died tragically while climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. The news broke the hearts of

so many people around the world. He was only 47 years old and had a lot of plans and ideas. His family, friends and colleagues remained loyal to his foundation and the wonderful work that Dr. Cohen started continues today, and I had a chance to see it, too, in person.

During our visit, we meet some of the children that are here as it is their turn to be treated, and their hearts to be saved. Among them, I meet Sami from Kenya, Aras from Iraq, Naomi from Ethiopia, etc. We take a few photos together, before leaving to visit the Wolfson Medical Center where the heart operations take place.

In one of the corridors we are greeted by Dr. Akiva Tamir, director of the Center. He tells us there about the work that his team does to treat the children that are brought here by SACH.

"Many children in the world," he says, "are dying because they lack adequate health care." He shows us the Center and talks about the work that he and his colleagues do to treat the patients. His face is smiling and his eyes are bright when he talks about the numerous children whose life they saved.

No one understands the importance of education better than the Jews. The Jewish nation has contributed to humankind, throughout history, some of the best-known scientists in the world, and many Nobel Prize winners. Dr. Tamir says that is the dream of every Jewish family to have one of the children become a doctor and another a lawyer.

We enter the rooms where the children are recuperating. Dr. Tamir introduces us to the doctors, the nurses, the children who lie in their beds and their mothers who sit next to them.

An hour later, as we leave the hospital we give our most sin-

cere best wishes to the medical personnel who are doing an extraordinary work with these children. The little kids who had no hope of surviving in their poor and backward countries are getting a second chance to live. A heart is saved when they are brought here. In the Holy Land.

A similar commitment to the heart is visible at Al-Qasemi Academy College of Education in Baqa el-Gharbiyah, which is the leading institution of higher Islamic education in Israel. It was founded in 1989 as a school of Islamic Law, by members of the Sufi Muslim community, who did not want young Muslims to have to travel abroad in order to be taught their religion. Furthermore, they often came back with ideas that were deemed inappropriate for the community.

The college started modestly, with only 40 students, and today has 1,600 young people working toward a degree in Islamic Law. It has 120 employees (both Jews and Arabs) and its main goal is to prepare teachers for the Arab schools in Israel. Arab women attend this college to become engineers. They learn the basics of technology, marking an historic break from the traditional jobs that women have held in their community.

The college offers degrees in Islamic Studies, in the English and Arabic Languages and Literatures, in Mathematics and Computer Sciences. Al-Qasemi is also a model in its efforts to create constructive dialogue between different cultures and religions.

Dalia Fadila, a lecturer in English Literature at Al-Qasemi College, tells us about the initial difficulties faced by women who attended this school, because of the dominant old mentality, which held that they were not equal to men and that

education was not right for them. She says that year after year, however, the situation has improved and today women are a majority among the students of this college. Their interest in education has grown dramatically.

“Our women and girls live between two worlds: modern Israel and the Arab tradition. This is not an easy situation. Most of them are not taking an active role in changing the society or are not focusing on efforts to change their status. However, as long as women don’t see themselves as equal human beings and as equal cultural partners with men, they will never be able to earn that status in the society,” says Dalia.

Asked about the vision of Al-Qasemi College in working with the Arab youth, she says: “The goal of Al-Qasemi College is that its students become proud citizens and Muslim Arabs of the 21st century, able to combine universal values with those of their cultural heritage. That they become missionaries of positive change in the communities where they come from.”

She adds, “It is unfortunate that most of the programs for studying Islam in Muslim academic institutions are driven by



Dalia Fadila, a lecturer in English Literature at Al-Qasemi College in Baqa el-Gharbiyah, Israel.



Students at Al-Qasemi College.

dogmatic frameworks of thought that would make sense only centuries ago."

"What is the identity of Israeli Arabs today?" I ask her.

"The Arab identity in Israel is the intersection of many circles: the national-cultural Arab identity, the Palestinian identity, the Islamic religious identity and that of Israel's citizenship," explains Dalia. "Each of those circles is also very complex within itself. For example, the Arab community in Israel is composed of Muslims, Christians and Druze. The combination of all these circles creates an identity that is prone to numerous crises as often these circles are in conflict with each other."

Visiting the Beit Canada Absorption Center in Ashkelon

Unlike Jerusalem, Ashkelon was a city about which I knew almost nothing. Maybe I had heard about it before but the name meant nothing to me when I learned that we were going to stop there. Nevertheless, it was not the city that we were going to visit but the Beit Canada Absorption Center situated in one of Ashkelon's neighborhoods.

We reached there in the evening. The director greeted us with enthusiasm and was very hospitable. They had prepared a cocktail with sodas and juices to honor us. A number of new and old immigrants who lived or had lived in the center were there with the director.

There are 32 of these Absorption Centers in Israel. They are opened for new immigrants, Jews who come from all over the world to settle in the country of their forefathers.

Because they come from various walks of life and sometimes different countries and cultures, they need a softer landing in Israel's society. In these Centers, they learn the language, they learn about the state of Israel, its history and the nature of its society.

Absorption centers also accommodate students from all over the world, who come to learn Hebrew or want to continue their academic studies in Israel. The Centers offer their own academic programs in Hebrew and provide the guests with all the support they need, from accommodation to a social network and a productive environment.

The greatest surprise of the night was certainly that Jews from Ethiopia had come there to join us. They had been living



Beit Canada Absorption Center in Ashkelon.

in this center when they came to Israel. A beautiful program with traditional dances from Ethiopia was performed by young women of Ethiopian origin. They keep alive their best traditions years after resettling to Israel.

Their story is very painful. One of them is Assia Avera. He told us about the odyssey of his family from Ethiopia to Israel. He had come to Israel when he was only seven years old and now he was a reservist soldier in the Israeli Army.

"It was my parents' dream to come to Israel," he said. There were at least 200 Jewish families in his village.

In 1983, they, including his family, decided to leave their homes and find a way towards Israel.

"They paid a guide to show us the way, as it was illegal in that time to leave Ethiopia. We were only five miles from the border of Sudan when the guide disappeared," Assia Avera remembers.



Ethiopian girls performing for the U.S. visitors in Beit Canada Absorption Center in Ashkelon.

"We lost the way and were not sure of our whereabouts anymore. We, about 500 Jews from many parts of Ethiopia, kept walking hoping to get deep into Sudan. We were attacked by robbers. They took everything we had. Some people were killed by the robbers. I was crying and my mother was very scared that something would happen to me. She tried to cover and hide me whenever she perceived a threat."

Assia Avera told us about the refugee camp where they settled in Sudan. The living conditions there were horrible. They even lacked drinking water. Many people died. Three months later, a plane came from Israel to rescue them and they all moved there.

"It was the first time in my life that I saw an airplane," he said. "It was the first time in my life that I saw white people as well. At first I thought that they were sick and they had lost all their

color.

"Here in Israel, we found everything that we needed. We stayed in this absorption center for two years and learned the basics about living in Israel and little by little we were helped to integrate into the society."

The Ethiopian Jews are black and they were welcomed into Israeli society. One more illustration on why the allegations that portray Israel as a racist state are unfounded.

The story of Assia Avera is one among thousands told by Ethiopian Jews who were saved from famine and persecution and brought to Israel to live a new life.



The first batch of these new emigrants was rescued by the famous Operation Moses in 1984. Israeli planes operating covertly in agreement with Sudan transported about 8,000 Ethiopian Jews from the refugee camps in Sudan to Israel.

Operation Moses lasted six weeks (until January 5, 1985), when the news became public and the Arab countries pressured Sudan to stop further transportation. A few months later, Vice President George H.W. Bush arranged a CIA-sponsored follow-up mission to Operation Moses. Operation

Joshua brought an additional 800 Beta Israel from Sudan to Israel. However, 15,000 Jews were left without hope in Ethiopia. According to The Jewish Virtual Library, about 1,600 “orphans of circumstance” lived in Israel separated from their families, completely in the dark about what was happening with their parents and siblings left in Africa.

In 1991, civil war broke out in Ethiopia and the country fell into chaos. People in Israel feared that the Jews there would be used as hostages by the rebels to draw profits from the international community. Another action, known as Operation Solomon, took place during the Jewish Sabbath, starting on Friday, May 24 and did not stop for 36 hours in a row. “34 El Al jumbo jets and Hercules C-130s—with seats removed to accommodate the maximum number of Ethiopians.”

Nearly 100,000 Ethiopian Jews live today in Israel reunited with their families and integrated in the society.

Visiting Technion – The Israel Institute of Technology

We spent the early morning of our fourth day in Israel visiting Technion. This is the leading institution for science and technology in the country.

Known as the Israel Institute of Technology, it was founded in 1924 in Haifa. Its first location is today the Israel National Museum of Science, Technology and Space (Daniel and Matilde Recanati Center).

We visited its present location on Mount Carmel. With its numerous buildings, the campus of the institute is rightly called Technion City.

Our group visited some of the most noted departments of

this academic center that is very successful, especially in the field of bio-medical technology. Among others, we met Dr. Shy Shoham, a young professor from the Faculty of Bio-Medical Engineering. He showed us the laboratories and spoke about the work that is done there.

We were amazed with its successes and its impact on Israeli society. Because of Technion, today Israel is a global leading force in the high-tech industry, which now accounts for more than 54 percent of Israel's industrial exports, and over 26 percent of the country's overall exports. Seventy-four percent of managers in Israel's electronic industries hold Technion degrees (according to the Institute's website).

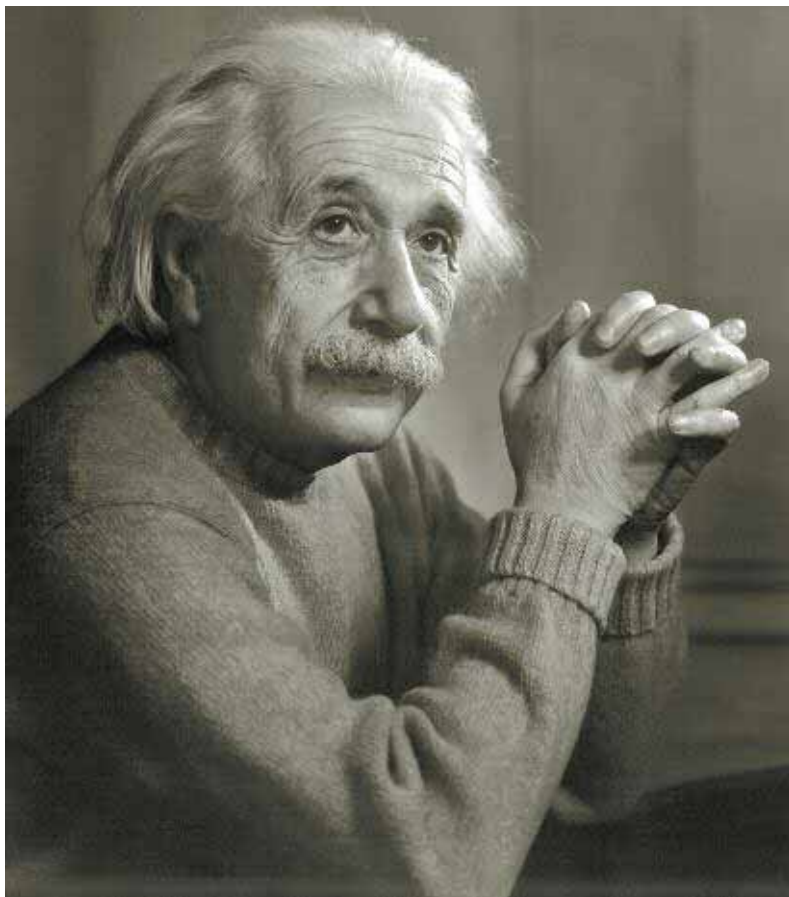
In relative numbers of scientists and engineers, or workers employed in research and development, Israel is way ahead of the U.S. and Japan, according to statistics provided by the Institute.

From Nobel Prize winners to authors of some of the greatest achievements in medicine and technology, the Israel Institute of Technology students are taught by some of the brightest minds in these fields.

Technion is also one of only five universities in the world with a student program that designs, builds, and launches its own satellites. Gurwin TechSat II was successfully launched in the orbit in 1998.

Very meaningfully, the first President of the Technion Society and one of the founders of the first Jewish modern university was the world's most famous modern scientist, Albert Einstein.

It is interesting that when the Israel Institute of Technology opened its doors, there was a debate whether the language in the classroom would be Hebrew or German. Eventually



Albert Einstein, the first President of the Technion Society and one of the founders of Israel's Institute of Technology in Haifa.

Hebrew won.

This occurred several years before the horrors of the Holocaust befell the Jewish population in Germany. According to some sources, Albania was crucial in helping Albert Einstein travel from Europe to America. In 1931, the famous scientist stayed for three days in Durrës, the main Albanian port, where



One of the buildings of the Technion, Israel's Institute of Technology.

he was provided with an Albanian passport with which he travelled to America. In 1935 he won permanent residence in the United States and thus escaped the Holocaust.

I did not mention this episode from the history to our hosts during the visit at Technion as it didn't seem appropriate, but as I remembered it, I felt proud for this service of the Albanians to science worldwide and to a great man not just for the Jewish people but for all of humanity.

The challenges facing Israel in the war against terrorism

Few people know as well as Tony Mattar what terrorism is. Others have watched on TV and computer screens or read about inhuman acts by suicides aimed at killing innocent people. He has himself been the victim of one of them.

It was Saturday, October 4, 2003. He was working in Maxim, his restaurant, in the Israeli city of Haifa. It was afternoon and his restaurant was filled with his regular clients. Suddenly, something happened that would make his restaurant become the focus of international media for that day. Hanadi Jaradat entered the restaurant acting as a normal client looking to have her lunch. She moved to the center of the eating space and a few moments later the explosives that she had hidden inside her clothes blew up. With her, 21 people, both Jews and Arabs, were killed and 51 others were wounded. Among the dead were also four children, one of whom was a baby of only four months.

The terrorist act was condemned harshly by the political leaders of the world. U.S. President George W. Bush was among the first to make a declaration against this recent display of terrorism in Haifa. "I condemn unequivocally the vicious act of terrorism committed today in Haifa. This murderous action, aimed at families gathered to enjoy a Sabbath lunch, killed and injured dozens of men, women, and children. This despicable attack underscores once again the responsibility of Palestinian authorities to fight terror, which remains the foremost obstacle to achieving the vision of two states living side by side in peace and security," he said.



Tony Mattar, co-owner of Maxim restaurant in Haifa, explaining to the visitors from U.S. the suicide attack in his restaurant, which took place on October 2, 2003. 21 Jews and Arabs died, including the Palestinian woman terrorist who blew herself up.

Hanadi was a member of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Her fiancé, her brother and her cousin had been killed by the Israel Defense Forces.

Maxim Restaurant, which was and still is owned jointly by Jews and Israeli Arabs, was considered a great example of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the beautiful city of Haifa. The restaurant's doors were opened in 1965, by its Jewish and Christian Arab owners.

On January 8, 2008, we visited this restaurant as planned before in the itinerary prepared by the organizers of this trip. Tony Mattar, one of the owners, interrupted his work for a few minutes and came to sit at our table.



The delegation from U.S. after a dinner with Wafa Zouabi Fahoum, fourth from right, chairperson of the Board of Beit Hagefen Cultural Art Center, at Maxim Restaurant, site of a notorious terrorist attack.

“What do you remember from that day?” I asked him.

He stood for a few moments without speaking. His mind was reviewing his memories of that fateful day. After a while he said that it was certainly the worst day of his life.

“This woman appeared at the door of the restaurant. It is a rule that people are searched for weapons but she reacted angrily. ‘Don’t you see that I am pregnant,’ she yelled. ‘You cannot do that with pregnant women.’ The security person for some reason trusted her,” recalls Tony.

“She had wrapped the explosives around her body in a way that would make her look pregnant. Who had thought that instead of a baby she was carrying death with her, the explo-



Monument honoring those who died in the terrorist attack on Maxim Restaurant in Haifa.

sives that a few minutes later would take 21 innocent lives," says a regretful Tony, who was working in the kitchen when the explosion occurred.

At first, he did not understand what had just happened, until people covered in blood started to enter the kitchen.

"They were like blind people because of the smoke, and the noise had been deafening. I can't find the words to describe the terror," Tony says. "Among the victims were my uncle and five employees of the restaurant." Late in the evening we left the restaurant and traveled towards Tel Aviv. On the way, I noticed a half-lit monument. It was dedicated to the victims of the Maxim Restaurant bombing.



The delegation from U.S. with Eron Hoch, Lieutenant in the Israeli Army, (third from the left) and Salih Abu Tarif, from the Religious Affairs Department (left).

The wall along the border

The history of the young state of Israel is full of stories like that. Terror in the streets and in restaurants. Terror where you would expect it the least. It is also the reason why the government has decided to build high walls along the borders with the Palestinian territories and Lebanon.

The next day, we stop by one of these “security fences.” It lies between Qalqilya, a Palestinian city with nearly 40 thousand inhabitants in the West Bank, near the Mediterranean Sea, and the Israeli city of Kfar Saba.

Our host, Eron Hoch, a lieutenant in the Israeli Army, leads



Army Lieutenant Eron Hoch near Qalqilya and Kfar Saba talking to the visitors about the Security Fence between these two towns.

us along the wall built by Israel and tells us about the two people on the opposite sides of the wall.

"Do you know how to guess the houses of the Palestinians and those of the Jews?" he asks, as we pass near a village. "The Palestinians build their house with flat roofs, because they think that their numerous descendants will need to add extra floors to it. The roofs of the Jews are usually sloped and with red tiles."

We cross the Green Line, a term that is used to mark the

1949 armistice line established between Israel and its neighbors (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (also known as Israel's War of Independence.)

Beyond the Green Line are the territories that Israel won after the Six Day War in 1967. They include the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula. Israel returned eventually this last territory to Egypt and evacuated its personnel from the Gaza Strip.

It is said that the name Green Line came from a green crayon that was used to mark the line in the map during the armistice negotiations in 1949.

Important parts of the wall coincide with the Green Line (it is not always a wall – in most places it is a network of fences and vehicle-barrier trenches, surrounded by a no-access security area that is 50-60 meters wide.)

The Israelis live on one side of the barrier and the Palestinians on the other.

"Can't they simply climb the wall and jump on this side?" I ask Lieutenant Hoch.

"Impossible," he responds. "If someone even touches the wall, an electrical signal comes to the base and we can react immediately, and move to the spot where the disturbance is detected. Sometimes birds trigger the signal. We're always alert."

What is the situation on the border with Lebanon after the "July 2006 war"? To learn more about the recent developments we meet with Barry Spielman, who holds the rank of Lt. Col. (Reserve) and is the Israel Defense Forces Spokesperson Escort Officer for senior foreign missions.

He gives us a ride up to the northern border with Lebanon,

where the skirmish began that would cause a full-scale war with the forces of Lebanese Hezbollah.

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah forces crossed the border, exactly where we are standing today, attacked two Israeli military cars with an anti-tank missile, then advanced towards them. Of seven Israeli soldiers, five were killed and two were wounded; and the remains of two of the dead were not turned over by Hezbollah at the time we visited. Five more were killed after a failed rescue operation.

Israel responded with a massive counter-attack from air and land striking the Lebanese military and civil infrastructure, including Beirut International Airport, because Hezbollah had used it to import weapons.

The Israeli Army took control of Southern Lebanon while Hezbollah kept shooting missiles inside Israel's territory.

The war ended on August 11, 2006, after a resolution in the Security Council of the United Nations that called on Hezbollah to disarm, in exchange for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon. Israel and Lebanon accepted the conditions and in October most the Israeli forces left Lebanon.

"The situation near the border continues to remain tense," says Lt. Col. Spielman, while we ride through the village of Zar, a target of many Hezbollah attacks.

"After the war," he continues, "we were obligated to move the barrier closer to Lebanon, so we could feel more secure. We did withdraw from Lebanon, but Hezbollah is not disarmed and it represents a threat to us."

"We have 15,000 soldiers today, along the border," says Lt. Col. Spielman. He does not underestimate the potential of Hezbollah to cause harm.



Photo after a briefing about the strategic threats facing Israel, with General (res.) Moshe Ya'alon, (seated third from the left) former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces.

Whomever you speak with about security in Israel, they all would mention two types of weapons that they feel threatens them: the Qassam and the Katyusha. I mentioned above the first one. The second is a type of rocket artillery first built in the Soviet Union in World War II. It is very cheap and it is produced quickly.

The name "Katyusha" was first used by the Red Army, whose troops adopted it from a popular song of those times, titled *Katyusha* and sung by Mikhail Isakovsky. The song was about a young woman who very much missed her boyfriend, a soldier in the Red Army.

Moshe Ya'alon is one of the officers with the longest career in the Israeli Army. He used to be Chief of Staff of the Israel

Defense Forces and led the army campaign to quell the al-Aqsa *Intifada*. Holding the rank of Lt. Gen. (Reserve), Ya'alon has also served in many high positions in the Israeli Army, including that of the Commander of the Paratroop Brigade.

We met him during a dinner in a hotel in Tel Aviv. Ya'alon gives us his perspective on the conflict of Middle East. He has seen almost everything, being in the center of most of the historical turns of the young history of the state of Israel. He remembers vividly the war over the Suez Canal, in which he lost most of the friends in his unit. He was wounded in the Lebanon War at the beginning of the 1980s. After he retired from the Army, he was very much in demand because of his long experience with armed conflicts. He is now focused on strategic and educational issues.

"The era of conventional wars has ended. We now face another kind of wars: the war against terrorism, against the users of chemical weapons, etc.," he says and goes on to accuse Iran of becoming an inspiration to all the extremist forces in the Middle East, and a safe support for the Palestinian forces that refuse to accept the right of Israel to exist.

He says, "We have agreed to a two-state solution, but then you have the Palestinians who say: we don't accept the existence of the state of Israel."

He points out that the Arab world today is rife with internal divisions: the moderates are in conflict with the jihadists.

"We should work with the moderate component to achieve a stable peace," he says. "Democracy does not mean only the right to vote. Democracy must come with free and true education, freedom of speech, respect for minorities, etc."

To him the key to the solution of all the problems in the

Arab world is education. Without changing education it will be very difficult to have real change there.

"How should the world react towards Iran?" I ask the general.

"I am against military confrontation, but Iran should face economic sanctions and serious diplomatic pressures until it stops its support for and its engagement in terrorism," he responds.

A last discussion about the subject of terrorism and the security of Israel, during our visit, took place in the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC). The deputy-director of this Center, Yoram Kahati, showed us a number of video clips of Palestinian and other Islamic radical militants as they train for terrorist activities meant to destroy the state of Israel.

The main goal of the Center is to collect documentation on terrorist activities. Their archive is impressive. From weapons to videos, from brochures to maps and uniforms, they have a rich material that offers an interesting insight on what these people do and how they prepare themselves to do it.

"It is unfortunate that so many Arabs, even those not involved in radical activities, see terrorism as a positive and necessary activity," says Kahati.

After watching a documentary with a lot of testimony on terrorist activities and groups, we walk to the second floor of the Center where we could see with our own eyes some of its collection.

I felt as if I was visiting a museum of terrorism. Grenades, maps, photos, explosives that are often used in suicide bombings, and everything else related to the activity of the Arab



Dr. Yoram Kahati, senior researcher and Deputy Director at the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center shows visitors from the U.S. tools used by terrorists to attack the state of Israel.



This is what the explosive material, used by suicide terrorists, looks like.

groups that are willing to use every means against Israel and its people. Few things can compare with the power of this gallery when it comes to showing what the terrorists are capable of doing and what is involved in the process.

There will not be peace in the Middle East, if one side does not accept the other's right to exist.

Yad Vashem, an unforgettable visit

If you go to Israel and don't stop at the Yad Vashem Museum, don't say that you have visited Israel, because you haven't. You cannot understand the Israel of today without going through Yad Vashem. Founded in 1953, it is the world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust.

We visited the Holocaust Museum on our second day in Israel.

The history of the Holocaust was not unknown to me. I had read many books on the subject and I had had also an unforgettable experience at a very young age when I visited Auschwitz, the largest and most notorious concentration camp of World War II.

I still remember vividly the gas chambers. More than one million people died there during the Holocaust, the historic effort of Nazi Germany to wipe the Jewish nation from the face of the earth.

The experience in Yad Vashem was different. It gave us more perspective. In Auschwitz, the details of tragedy were more tangible, the personal items, the clothes, the toothbrushes, the gas chambers where people actually died.

As we visited Yad Vashem, I saw beyond Auschwitz, to the



Pictures of Holocaust victims in the Yad Vashem Museum.

general phenomenon of the mass killing of the Jews. How can people reach this level of criminality? How can you plan the extermination of an entire nation? How can millions of innocent people be sent to death in such a methodical way? And how can some people deny that this horrible tragedy happened when so much evidence has been kept and preserved over the years and its survivors are still alive to tell the story?

This museum has been visited by many leaders of the world,

celebrities of all the fields, famous people, as well as regular visitors from all over the world.

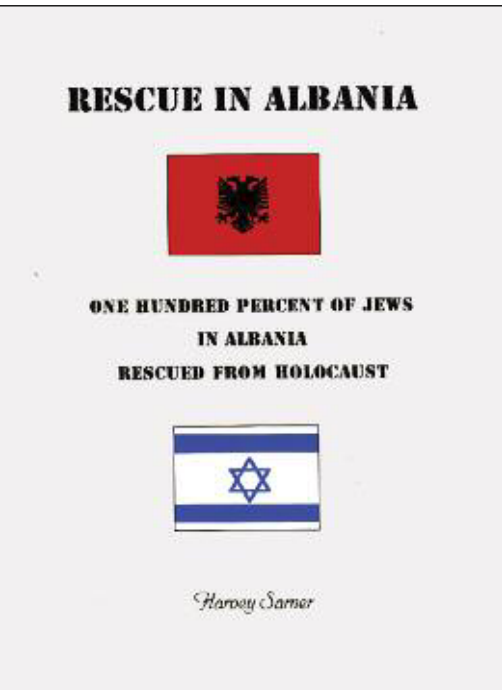
I believe that every Albanian that has the chance to visit it, aside from the pain and the sadness for this unique tragedy, will also feel pride. Albania is the only country in Europe that was occupied by the Germans but where not only the entire Jewish community was saved but their number at the end of the war was greater than that at the war's beginning.

Before the Holocaust, only 200 Jews lived in Albania, but the population grew to more than 2,000 as Jews from other countries fled to a country that was seen as a safe haven for them. They came from Germany, Austria, Serbia, Greece, etc., hoping to continue to the Land of Israel or other places of refuge.

In 1934, Herman Bernstein, the former United States Ambassador to Albania, wrote: "There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania, because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hate do not exist, even though Albanians themselves are divided into three faiths."

The London-based *Jewish Daily Post* reported in July 1935: "It has been a month since Albanian diplomats in Europe have been implementing the order received from King Zog's government to issue Albanian passports to as many Jews as want to go and live in Albania."

The remarkable assistance afforded to the Jews was grounded in *Besa*, a code of honor, which still today serves as the highest ethical code in Albania. *Besa*, means literally "to keep a promise." One who acts according to *Besa* is someone who keeps his word, someone to whom one can trust one's life



Cover of Sarner's book.



Lekë Dukagjini (1410-1481)

and the lives of one's family.

Besa was part of *Kanun* (The Code), usually known as the *Code of Lekë Dukagjini*, named for a 15th century chieftain who standardized the oral customary law. *Kanun* defined morality and behavior in the Albanian society and was more influential than religion or state laws.

Following are some important articles of the *Kanun*, which are interesting to read in the light of the Jewish rescue in Albania. They were mentioned also in Harvey Sarner's book, *Rescue in Albania*.

"The Albanian home is at the service of God and the


 יד ושם
 YAD VASHEM

The International Jewish Legation Authority
 הרשות הבינלאומית לטיפול ביהודים
 The Righteous Among the Nations Department
 Righteous Among the Nations Endorsed by Yad Vashem
 By 1 January 2010

ALBANIA

NAME	YEAR
Balla, Destan & Lima	1992
Bicaku, Mufat; son Niazi	1996
Borici, Shapi & Gamile; d. Bahrije	1993
Burdo, Shyqyri & Xhemile	1992
Ciftia Agosti & Gysepin; ch: Margerita, Cesarina, Giovana	1992
Frasheri, Hysref & Ermine & son Mehmet	2000
Hoti, Hasan, his sister Fife Gjylbegu; ch: Cele & Vehbi	1994
Hoxha, Nuro	1992
Hoxha, Shaban & Slavet; son Hilmi	1991
Kadiu, Besim & Aishe	1992
Kasapi, Zyrra; son Hamdi	1995
Kilica, Mikel	1999
Koceri, Kasam Jakup	2000
Kona, Vasil & Kristina	1993
Lekatari, Mihal	1992
Mece, Suleiman & Zenepe	1992
Musali, Dulaj	1992
Myrto, Abdulla & Tje	1992
Myrto, Shyqyri	1993
Nosi, Vasil & Kelkira; br. Nos; sis. Adelina	1992
Orgocka, Paskal & Lefkothea	1991
Piliku, Njazi & Liza	1997
Qocja, Beqir	1992
Rezniciq, Arslan	2008
Ruli, Metin Aziz & Shpresa	1992
Sheko, Stavro & Nora	1993
Sheqer Pashkaj Ali	2002
Shkurti, Pietro & Magdalena	1992
Shpuzza, Eshefere	1993
Toplani, Atif & Ganimet	1992
Veseli, Hamid; brother Xhemal	2004
Veseli, Vesel & Fatima; son Refik	1987
Xhyheri, Qamili & Hanume	1992
Zyma, Besim & Hignet	1999

IN HONOR OF THE ALBANIAN MEN AND WOMEN
 WHO DURING THE NAZI GERMAN OCCUPATION, 1943-1944,
 GUIDED BY THE PRINCIPLE OF NEHA AND AT GREAT RISK TO THEMSELVES
 SHELTERED AND SAVED THE LIVES OF ALL JEWISH PEOPLE LYING IN
 ALBANIA

PER NDER TE BONDASVE SHK GRABE SHQIPTARE TE GJET GATE PUSHTIMET
 NAKRISTOJEMMM NE VITET 1943-1944 TE URBODUR ANA NAJMI I "BESOPDHE DURE
 RESKURJAJET E TYRE SHTRYUAN SHK BASHKUAN TE GATHE HEBREJ-TE SE JECON
 NE SHQIPERI

BALLA,DESTAN & LIMA
 BICAKU,MUFAT, DALLA NAZI
 BORICI,SHAPI & GAMILE,VUJZE BASHJE
 BURDO,SHYQYRI & XHEMILE
 CIFTIA,AGOSTI & GYSEPIN,FEMILJE MARGARITA,CECARINA,GJOVANA
 FRASHERI, HYSREF & ERMINE & DALE MEHMET
 HOTI,HASAN,MOTER FIFE,FEMILJE CELE &VEBI
 HOXHA,NURO
 HOXHA,SHABAN &SLAVET,DALLA HILMI
 KADIU,BESIM & AISHE
 KASAPI,ZYRRA,DALLE HAMDI
 KILICA,MIKEL
 KOCERIN,KASEM JAKUP
 KONA, VASIL & KRISTINA
 LEKATARI,MIHAIL
 MECE,SULEJMAN & ZENEPE
 MUSALI,DULAJ
 MYRTO ABDULLA &TJE
 MYRTO,SHYQYRI
 NOSI,VASIL & KELIKIRA,VELLA NOS,MOTER ADELINA
 ORGOCKA,PASKAL &LEFKOTHEA
 PILIKU,NJAZI & LIZA
 QOCJA,BEQIR
 KALLMETIN AZIZ&SHPRESA
 SHEKO,STAVRO & NORA
 SHEQER,PASHKAJ ALI
 SHKURTI,PIETRO & MAGDALINA
 SHPUZZA,ESHFERE
 TOPTAN,ATIF & GANIMET
 VESILI,VESEL & FALTIME,DALLE REFIK
 XHYHERI, QAMIL & HANUME
 ZYMA,BESIM & HIGNET

SOCALLY HONORED ARE THOSE WORTHYOTHER SHQIPTARE
 WHOSE NAMES REMAIN UNRECORDED
 KURSELJI TE NDRHJAN JANH ATA SHQIPTARE ENKAT E TE GJELVE HUK JAME,PERNEGJUR
 KETU

A number of Albanians were recognized for saving Jewish people during World War II in Albania. Their names are included in the document above released by Yad Vashem (left) and in a special plaque (right), installed in the Museum of National History in Albania to commemorate this honorable humanitarian act.

sojourner."

"Every hour of the day and night, a man must be ready to receive a guest with bread, salt, and an open heart. He must offer him a bed, a pillow, and a warm hearth."

"If an Albanian is treacherous to those who trusted him – his community has a duty to destroy him and no vengeance may be sought for his blood."

"A man must defend his guest's honor even if he endangers his own life in doing so."

Many of the Albanians who saved the Jews were Muslims. This

has led authors, either Jews or non-Jews, to emphasize religion and underestimate the nationality of the rescuers. You are more likely to see stories of "how Muslims from Albania saved the Jews" rather than "the Albanians who saved Jews." This is unfair to the Christian Albanians who also risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. It makes many Albanians, Muslims included, feel uncomfortable.

The communist regime that took power in Albania after World War II isolated the country from the rest of the world. Rescue of the Jews, this great act of courage, has been revealed only recently. Albania recognized Israel in 1949, but the communist regime, because of ideological reasons, saw fit to side with the Arabs over the years. When the Albanians overthrew the dictatorship in 1991, one of the first changes in the foreign policy of their state was normalization of relations with Israel.

As the timeline that follows demonstrates, the revelation of Albanian heroism during the Holocaust began with the 1990 visit of Congressman Tom Lantos and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi to Tirana, as the first U.S. officials to enter Albania in fifty years.

"Seeking to ingratiate himself with Tom Lantos, a Jewish American Holocaust survivor," Joseph DioGuardi says, "then-dictator Ramiz Alia presented us with never-before-seen archives containing letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, and other records of the unpublicized heroic deeds of Albanians who rescued Jews during World War II."

Upon returning to the States, DioGuardi sent the files to Israel, where they were authenticated by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem.

An American author, Harvey Sarnier, was another pioneer in



The author of this book in front of the entrance to the Yad Vashem Museum.

the efforts to reveal the story of Jewish rescue during World War II in Albania. His book *Rescue in Albania* was published in 1994, sponsored by Albanian American Civic League. Since then many facts have continued to come to light.

So far, Yad Vashem has honored more than 60 Albanians for sheltering Jews during World War Two.

In August 2005, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum compiled a list of the names of 2,265 Jews who came to Albania before and during World War II.

As our tour of Yad Vashem began, Yehudit Barsky told the woman who was guiding us during the tour, that I was Albanian and that it would be nice to explain to the group what happened

to the Jews in that country during World War II. However, she never mentioned anything about this during the tour, either because she forgot or maybe because she was not informed about it.

In his introduction to my book, *The Albanians of America*, a 1,000-page collection of biographies of distinguished Albanian-Americans, Ismail Kadare, frequently mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature, reviewed efforts made by humanity over time by listing names, important or not, whose deeds or fate marked an era.

Among other things he mentions is that at Yad Vashem, "in Jerusalem, in the children's pavilion, within a dark sphere signifying universal space, the names of tens of thousands of Jewish children killed by the Nazi are heard day and night, endlessly."

As I moved through the museum, looking at the photos and lists of names, from one room to another, I was once again, as many years ago in Auschwitz, reminded of one of the darkest chapters in the history of the humanity. One that should never be forgotten and one that should be told to generations after generations.

Albanians in the Middle East during the Ottoman Empire

A well-known thoroughfare in Jerusalem is called Agron Street. It is not related to the Illyrian king with the same name. Gershon Agron, whose name was given to the street, was a pioneer of journalism in Jerusalem. He founded *The Palestine Post*, the English language daily which later changed its name to *The Jerusalem Post*. In addition, the center in Jerusalem of the Israeli Press Association bears his name.



Vaso Pasha (1825-1892)



Mehmed Ali Pasha (1769-1849)

After learning this story from our Jewish guide, I started to think about the past stories of Albanians living in the Middle East. Some of them left traces in the history of the Middle East when it was part of the vast Ottoman Empire. Among them were Mehmed Ali Pasha (known to the Egyptians as Muhammad Ali), the founder of the modern state of Egypt; Vaso Pasha, Governor of Lebanon (1883-1892); Mehdi Frashëri, Governor of Jerusalem and of Palestine; Köprülü Mehmed Pasha, Governor of Jerusalem; Koca Mimar Sinan Aga (known as Arkitekt Sinani to Albanians, or Sinan the Architect), who as I mentioned above designed and directed the construction

that created the private and protected space for Jews to pray by the Western Wall, etc.

Unfortunately, little is known today among the locals in these places in the Middle East about the contribution of these Albanians in their history. If you suggest to Turks that Kemal Atatürk was of Albanian origin, they stare at you with surprise and disbelief. If you tell Jews or Arabs that some Albanians once ruled over Jerusalem, you may get a reply that they were Ottomans if not Turks. There may be more recognition among the Egyptians. I have met many of them who were aware that the founder of their modern state was an Albanian.

One of the people with whom I had the pleasure to share my trip to Israel was Dr. Kemal Silay, who came to the United States from Turkey and who is a professor at Indiana University (Chair of Ottoman and Modern Turkish Studies). He happens to share an Albanian origin too, and says that Albanians have played a crucial role in the history of Turkey and Egypt, turning them away from the East and religious extremism while orienting them toward the modern world and the West.

“Without them these countries would be more similar to Iraq than to what they are today,” he says.

The list of the Albanians who played a role in historical events or periods in the Middle East is long. Muhamed Mufaku, an Albanian historian, offers many other names that I did not previously know. According to him, in the 18th century, Ahmet Pasha was *vali* (Ottoman province administrator) of Palestine. Other sources say he was a Bosnian. What is proven, says Mufaku, is that he was served by a thousand Albanian foot soldiers and 800 Bosnian horsemen, whose duty was to defend Jerusalem.

Ahmet, who started his career as a simple soldier in Egypt, became so strong that he could even refuse an order issued by the Sultan.

In an article published by *Rilindja (Rebirth)*, once the most important newspaper in Prishtina, capital of Kosova, the historian Mufaku also mentions an Albanian called Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Mehmed Pasha, who in 1831 made a triumphal entrance in Jerusalem and intended to free the City from the Sultan's rule.

Until then, Palestine was gripped with fear and violence. Ibrahim Pasha restored its order. According to Arabic historiography, he became known as a man who set the foundations for interreligious harmony and equality among religions for years to come.

Mufaku quotes from a letter that Ibrahim Pasha sent to a Muslim cleric: "As you know, Holy Jerusalem has many places of worship and monasteries, where Christians and Jews from various countries and places come and pray. Considering that these people already suffer a lot because of the extra taxes (tolls) they have to pay along the way, we decided for the sake of co-existence to abolish all the taxes imposed on them."

In 1838, Ibrahim Pasha established an obligatory draft for everyone, despite their nationality. Mufaku writes that this irritated the Arabs, who were not accustomed to joining the army, and had left other people to do the heavy lifting, when it came to wars and military expeditions, especially the warriors of Albanian origin.

The situation got so tense that the rebellious Arabs put their Albanian *vali* under siege somewhere in Jerusalem. To save his son, Mehmed Ali himself had to travel from Egypt to

Jerusalem.

The regime and the power of Ibrahim Pasha in Palestine continued until the pressure of the Great Powers forced him to resign from his position in 1840. Thousands of Albanian soldiers left Palestine in February 1841 to join him in Egypt.

Another Albanian mentioned by Mufaku is Mustafa Efendi Al-Arnauti, born in Egypt and one of the most distinguished personalities in Jaffa during the 19th century. After participating in a failed anti-British revolt in Egypt in 1881, he was obliged to return to Palestine.

In the battle of Akko in 1799, against the French led by Napoleon Bonaparte, another Albanian made his name. He was Ismail Pasha who fought on the side of the Ottomans. Later in Akko, he became one of the people closest to Ahmet Pasha.

So what happened to the Albanians in the Middle East? Where are their grandsons and granddaughters? What do they do? There was a war in Kosova, but we never heard from them. Communism collapsed in Albania, but they were still nowhere to be seen. Some Albanian clerics who got an education in the countries of the Middle East talk about many acclaimed writers and politicians of Albanian origin, but we don't know them.

One of the reasons that today they are lost to us, is because they themselves decided it should be so. They never came to visit their old country, nor did they do anything for the liberation of Albania as they did for other nations in the Middle East. They did not contribute in our history, but instead were assimilated in the Arab societies, losing any feeling of Albanian national identity.

It is not only their fault. We never had an initiative connect-

ing our lands in the Balkans with the descendents of those who left our country more than a century ago. However, the Arbëresh in Italy still preserve their traditions, almost 600 years since they moved from Albania. The Albanians who have emigrated to Western Europe and the United States have not abandoned their identity. Unfortunately, this was not the case with the Albanians that moved *en masse* to Turkey and the Middle East. Most of them were assimilated and lost their connections with the old country.

Years ago, I met an Albanian from Turkey. He was so little informed about Albanians that he argued with me against the independence of Kosova. "Autonomy should be enough for you," he said, taking the same position as that of Belgrade.

The Albanians of the Middle East and of Turkey can often be identified by a very common last name: Arnauti (meaning "Albanian" in Turkish). They are numerous in those countries but to us they seem lost forever, a dried up branch of our national tree.

A FRIENDSHIP BUILT AMID SUFFERING IS HARD TO BREAK

*A heartfelt look at the Albanian-Israeli connection
in the past and future*

Nothing forges friendship between two peoples better than help in difficult moments of their history. This is why friendship between Jews and Albanians is so strong and meaningful.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain at the end of the 15th century some of them moved to Albania. Not only did they find there a safe haven but their descendants who were still living in Albania during the Holocaust were also extremely fortunate. As were any refugees who arrived in Albania during those dark years. One hundred percent of Jews in Albania were saved, a record that makes all Albanians proud today, wherever they live.

Those who doubt the lessons of the Holocaust have only to look at Balkan history in the 1990s. Mass executions and deportations returned to haunt Europe. Serbia's dictator Milosevic (one of the best friends of Saddam in Iraq) claimed to be a communist, but there was no difference in essence between the mass graves he left behind and those that Hitler's Nazis accumulated. We are grateful that the Balkan wars did not entail a tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust (more than

12,000 civilians were killed in Kosova alone), because the perpetrator this time was weaker, his "playground" small and the international community more vigilant.

It was exceptionally important that when, in 1999, the Serbian police and military sent one million Kosovar Albanians out of their homes in a forced deportation, using those trains of death so reminiscent of the Holocaust, the Jewish community in America stepped up to provide vital assistance to the refugees, while Israel generously provided shelter for at least a hundred of them. U.S. Representative Tom Lantos, Democrat from California and the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the U.S. Congress, for many years served as a champion of Albanian human rights in Kosova. The Jews were there for us in our difficult hours and they should be proud of their actions.

Albanians and Israel are not only bound by this noble friendship, but they also share similar stories.

When I moved to the United States in 1990, I heard an old toast with which the old Albanian Americans used to greet each other: "Vitin tjetër në atdhe!" (Next year in the homeland!) I later learned that the Jewish people had had the same kind of greeting for thousands of years: "Next year in Jerusalem!"

It was a great pleasure to see that in America the Jewish and Albanian communities had good relations and that such friendship persisted. I had the chance to meet Jews whose parents had been saved in Albania, one of them being Dr. Anna Kohen, president of the Albanian-American Women's Organization.

The centuries have been hard on those nations, which history long denied a state of their own. Unless you have sought state independence for centuries it is hard to understand the

feelings of Jews and Albanians about possession of their own home and sovereign state.

Just like the Jews, Albanians have always been “different” in their region. Surrounded by a sea of Slavs and their Greek allies, the Albanians, in their struggle for independence, have always been crushed.

It was only when the United States appeared on the international stage and Europe began to abandon its colonialist mentality that the fate of the Albanians changed. President Woodrow Wilson saved Albania from being divided between the neighboring countries just as in 1999, the U.S.-led military intervention saved Kosova from a humanitarian catastrophe by stopping so-called “ethnic cleansing” – a campaign of massacre and expulsion. In 1912, Albania managed to declare its independence from the Ottomans, but in Kosova a new, Serb occupation began. Regimes came and went in Serbia: monarchists, fascists, communists and nationalists, but they all ran Kosova with an iron hand, killing an imprisoned people seeking only to read and write in their own language and asking for no more than basic human rights.

What other people can better understand the plight of the Jews as they fought for a home and their own state? That is why it should come as no surprise that Jews were sheltered and protected in Albania during the Holocaust. The American Jewish leader Herman Bernstein, U.S. Ambassador to Albania just when the dark years of Holocaust were starting, wrote about the country: “There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hate do not exist, even though Albanians themselves are divided into

three faiths..."

Those who today deny the right of Israel to exist and for the Jews to live in the land of their forefathers play the same tune as those who seek to deny the right of sovereignty to Kosova. Albanians have shown the door to those who have come asking for support in their campaigns against Israel, and the Jews should do the same to those who want to force the Albanians of Kosova to live under the same state that tried unsuccessfully to exterminate and force them out.

It is sad to see Serbian activists, diplomats and officials come to Israel and try to frighten Jews away from friendship with the Albanians by touting an Islamist connection. Jews should know better. They should know that Albanians have three religions: Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism and Islam. The Albanian Muslim is not the wild-eyed terrorist that the Serbs describe, but a progressive, moderate Muslim perfectly fit to live in a Western-style secular democracy. There is a well-established harmony among religions in Albania and both Muslim and Christian Albanians want independence for Kosova.

In 1998 Serbian paramilitaries entered the Catholic village of Korenica in Kosova and killed every civilian in sight, even women and children who had taken refuge in the village's church. These victims were hardly the Muslim terrorists they warn you about.

The Serbian leaders and activists are busy trying to rewrite history. Nearly the entire Belgrade Jewish community perished, a notorious success by local quisling authorities under General Milan Nedic. They enthusiastically denied Jews the right to work, took away their property, and stripped them of

all their civil rights. Nazi official Harald Turner reported to Berlin as early as August 1942 that Serbia was the only European country in which the Jewish and Gypsy questions had been completely "solved."

Anti-Semitism is not only a phenomenon of the past in Serbia. In 2003, the Council of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church decided to include in its calendar of saints one of the most anti-Semitic personalities in modern history, Nikolaj (Velimirovic), Bishop of Ohrid and Zica. The canonized cleric blamed the Jews for everything he saw as dangerous in the world: "socialism, atheism, tolerance to other faiths, pacifism, revolution, capitalism and communism." To him they were children of "the Devil." Velimirovic maintained this attitude even while he was imprisoned in Dachau (for less than four months in 1944).

As if canonization were not enough, bishop Nikolaj, who once was decorated by Adolf Hitler himself, has recently been lauded by some of the highest Serbian post-Milosevic leaders, including Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica.

Kostunica's foreign minister, Vuk Jeremic, used his last visit to Israel to argue with politicians here against recognition of an independent Kosova. He spoke of the "Albanian Islamic danger" and the Serbian "great friendship for Israel". It would have been a good opportunity to ask him about the newest saint in his calendar.

The canonization of Nikolaj Velimirovic is part of a general anti-Semitic culture that has reemerged in Serbia over the past several years. A recent Helsinki Human Rights Report said "since the end of the 1980s, Serbia's publishing sector has been a most prominent propagator of anti-Semitism, with over 150

titles published by various publishing establishments. Some of these specialize in anti-Semitic publishing..."

As an Albanian I am proud and happy to visit Israel today and also to talk about the independence of Kosova, not because the Serbs are anti-Semitic and Albanians are not, not because Albanians saved the Jews during Holocaust or because Albanian Muslims are not extremists. What makes me feel at home here is the knowledge that I am among people who have suffered even more than my people did. That I am among people who were denied their rights just as they were denied to my people. And that I am among people who are still threatened by extremists who want to see them disappear without a future.

Just like Israel, Kosova has decided to be part of the liberal democratic Western world.

I am also visiting Israel today for a better view of the friendship between our two peoples, a beautiful connection forged amid suffering but destined to be cherished in the better days that are coming. A precious tradition that we must be sure future generations will know how to preserve.

January 2008

OF ALBANIANS AND JEWS



By the Very Reverend Arthur E. Liolin

The Albanians and the Jewish people have many things in common. Their ancestral lands have been crossroads for cultures and belligerents moving toward other conquests and traversing their terrain, one on the western shore of the Balkans, the other on the western shore of the Near East. Both have generated heroes like Solomon and Scanderbeg, resisted foes from lofty redoubts in Masada and Kruja; both have endured migrations and lived in a Diaspora, which never forgot its origin.

Both have tasted the bitter herb of isolation and estrangement and savored a sweet longing for a historic past. Both are few in number, yet have intense and profound fervors: the Hebraic is expressed in intellectual excellence and accomplishment, the Illyrian in loyalty and adherence to canons of honor. The first is based on a revealed ethic, the latter on an

inherited sense of right. One are a people of the covenant, the other a people of the code. Both are a people persecuted; one for its religious antiquity, the other for its linguistic uniqueness, giving rise to a challenging relationship with neighbors.

Both have pronounced patriarchal underpinnings yet have exalted the role of a woman and harbor the habit of breaking the molds they themselves have formed. Both have witnessed a diversity in religious expression fostering a broad spectrum of belief and both aspire to a tradition of tolerance that competes with its extremes, the latter being a national pastime.

Both have taught through storytelling or legend transmitted to other generations in the vital intimacy of clan and home. The Judaic educator tests his charges by encouraging dialogue and inquiry. The Albanian elder relishes argument as a strategic device. In debate or in battle, ingenuity and risk are ideals admired by the two. The Jew loves paradox in order to clarify a mystery. The Albanian devises a structure precisely in order to circumvent it.

While differences abound and historical circumstances have shaped their respective societal perspective, both are characterized by a savvy skill for survival and a charm, which alternately elicits resentment and respect in others. Both have tasted of collective tragedies and suffered the harsh judgment of stereotypes whose harm has sheathed their psyche with the defensive armor of cohesiveness. Yet both are noted for their bristling independence, a suspicious nature, a penchant for internecine squabbling and a search for a better life, which seems never to be satisfied.

In cultural affairs, the Jew is diverse in his generosity to music, the arts and social causes. For the Albanian, charity is

prompted by immediate need and is extended through personal hospitality. For one, the institution is worthy, for the other the institution is eschewed.

A distinct and hearty sense of humor reflects a contrasting view of life. Jewish wit is wry and self-deprecating by nature, elevating God and emphasizing human foible. The Albanian raconteur laces his tale with irony and meandering anecdote whose arcane lesson is harder to discern. Yet both styles have a point to make, a moral and a way of life to be nurtured.

To each, vanity, selfishness and betrayal are counterpoised by traits of sacrifice and nobility common also to most humans. The Jew, however, tends to forgive while the Albanian rarely forgets an affront. The former relies on reconciliation, the latter on negotiation to emerge from an impasse.

Both have sorrowful experiences of the alienating distance of God and a corresponding longing for Him in their scripture, oral literature and respective histories. Yet both have a potent sense of His inscrutable and pervasive presence. Grief and genocide has been the lot of one; assimilation and derision the lot of the other. The two continue to strive in transcending untold humiliations. Both have episodes when through intellect, ego, or an angry sense of justice they have battled His will. Both have wrestled with the matter of faith, in their identity as a people or in personal inquiry. While the Albanian often contests with his destiny as a question of fate, the Jew explores the pattern behind human accident. However, both prize individual initiative in overcoming the order of things.

As always, generalizations exclude the unique and the notable. Or is it that distinctive attributes and values of a people are embodied in the exceptional acts of a few, such as those

who risked hearth and safety in order to shelter a friend or a foreigner?

With all of this therefore, and more, it is noble of heart and right for the soul that Albania's "righteous gentiles" be honored for their singular contribution in saving countless Jewish families from the horrors of the Holocaust. It is fact that Albania is the only European nation whose Jewish population was larger after World War II than before it. Not one vulnerable descendant of Abraham was ever handed over to treachery by his Albanian neighbor. May their deeds be blessed by God to be remembered and imitated by men.

The Very Reverend Arthur E. Liolin is Chancellor of the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America. While a student at Princeton, he studied the work of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber and received the B'nai B'rith Citation of Merit. He accompanied the first ecumenical group to enter Albania in 1991, led by Rabbi Arthur Schneier and the Appeal of Conscience Foundation. In 1994, he participated in a Jewish/Christian Conference on Scientific and Social Challenges held in Jerusalem. While in Israel, he met with several groups of newly settled Albanian Jews.

About the Author:

Vehbi Bajrami was born in 1964 in the Presheva Valley, a mainly Albanian-populated region in South Serbia.

He studied Literature and Albanian Language at the University of Prishtina in Kosova. Before moving to the United States, he worked as an editor at *Bota e Re*, a newspaper in Prishtina.

He started as a staff writer at *Illyria*, the Albanian-American newspaper in New York, in 1991. He rose to become an editor and then managing editor of the newspaper.

He served as chief of the Albanian language section of the Voice of America, then became owner of *Illyria* in 2006.

Vehbi Bajrami is the author of the encyclopedic *Shqiptarët e Amerikës* (*The Albanians in America*), published in New York by Albanian Publishing in 2003. It is the most complete work to date on the history of the Albanians in America.

He lives in Manhattan with his wife Eugenia and their children Roni and Rini.

Vehbi Bajrami's *My Visit to the Holy Land* packs a great deal of information into a very personal account of an Albanian American travelling to Israel for the first time. Even though he has not been to the Jewish state before, Bajrami demonstrates a great sensitivity to the history, culture, politics, and especially the various religions of the region. At all times his narrative is tied together by the keen sensitivities of an ethnic Albanian who draws important links between the Albanian and Jewish experiences, the parallels between the challenges for full international acceptance of Kosovo and Israel, and the powerful historical fact of how Albania not only saved its entire Jewish population during World War II, but was the only country in Europe to have a larger Jewish population at the end of the War than at the beginning. This is a book of understanding, tolerance, and personal appeal. I strongly recommend it.

Rep. Eliot L. Engel

House of Representatives

Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Vehbi Bajrami gives a compelling account of the deep ties between Jews and Albanians. On these pages, he describes shared values of both peoples emphasizing loyalty, family, education and hard work. Jews and Albanians have both suffered tyranny and oppression, which bonds their histories as well as their approach to the future.

David L. Phillips

Former Executive Director, Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity

I congratulate Vehbi Bajrami for turning perhaps the most memorable trip of my life into a book. His work masterfully highlights the many great aspects of the trip we took together. It is one thing to read about Israel, it is certainly something else to visit there and interact with the rich and varied cultures and institutions within Israeli society. Our trip provided plenty of evidence that those who want to live peacefully with the majority Jewish population have indeed succeeded in life. But those who have adopted violent rejectionism not only terrorize the State of Israel daily, but their own people, as well. I hope this book reaches a wide audience.

Dr. Kemal Silay

President, Center for Islamic Pluralism

This book is more than about a visit to the Holy Land. Bajrami gives his readers an insight into the hearts and minds of those who struggle to live in peace in a turbulent world.

Rose Dosti

Author and former writer/columnist, Los Angeles Times

Vehbi Bajrami's uplifting and extraordinary work *My Visit to the Holy Land* continuously challenges the evils of intolerance and hatred as he tries to break the shackles of ignorance imposed by the enemies of Israel. His work illustrates the intellectual depth of a human being who wants to make a difference by championing peace, tolerance, love and modernity in the Middle East and in the world. As a resident of The Bronx, and as a former elected official, I have had the privilege to know the wonder of a proud people, the Albanians, who are reclaiming and rebuilding Bronx Neighborhoods. This work shows that Jews and Albanians, who have a history of suffering, are allies who must work together for a prosperous and peaceful future. Two beleaguered people confronted with evil must be determined to fight side by side against those who want to destroy them.

Stephen B. Kaufman, Esq.

Former New York State Assemblyman