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## L.A. Unity Trip: Statements from the Rabbis

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### Optimism Can Follow Pessimism

by Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, B'nai David-Judea

Tuesday and Wednesday were our only full days on the ground in Israel. To my dismay, I was feeling by midday on Wednesday that these two days were radically disconnected from each other, giving the trip a jagged, incoherent quality. Tuesday, which featured Jerusalem-based briefings with military and government officials and a sobering conversation about the coming challenge of keeping Israel both Jewish and democratic, was a continuous exercise in anxiety. A stark grappling with the existential threats.

Wednesday, in disorienting contrast, unfolded as if in a different universe. We were in the Negev among university students who had built villages with their own hands, in the dream of settling the desert, of possessing Eretz Yisrael for the Jewish people. Students out to establish their own place in Israel's story, devoting themselves to the Zionist project with a passion worthy of the chalutzim [pioneers]. On Wednesday, the words "Iran," "Hamas" and "Goldstone" were never uttered. In their place were "Zionism," "Am Yisrael" and "giving to one's country."

Tuesday and Wednesday seemed to stand in bewildering discontinuity. Until I realized that Wednesday has always been Israel's response to Tuesday. It's the cosmic chutzpah of Zionism. The indomitable belief in the power of the collective Jewish will to overcome whatever may be out there.

In retrospect, the bridge from Tuesday to Wednesday was President Shimon Peres' response to a member of our group who asked how, despite everything, he remains so optimistic about Israel's future. "Optimists and pessimists die the same way," the president said. "But they live very differently."



### Hope Springs Eternal

by Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple

As I awoke at 2:30 a.m. to see the sun rise over the walls of Jerusalem, I realized that it was a jetlag of centuries as well as hours. We were moved by young and old: by the pioneers of Ayalim, building mud huts for Jews to live in in the Negev; by the volunteers at Hazon Yeshayu, providing food and dental care and kindness to the hungry and bereft of Israel. And of course by Shimon Peres, whose weary but still buoyant optimism provided the tag line of our trip: "Optimists and pessimists die the same way; but they live very differently."

Israel is still beset by problems, anguish and moral challenges. There is still darkness. But as I watched the sun rise I thought that the prayer will still be realized: a new light will shine on Zion, and the world will feel its warmth.



### Living Our Shared Vision

by Rabbi Laura Geller, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills

We drove to the Negev to meet the future. We saw it in the faces of the young volunteers who have created Ayalim, a contemporary Zionist model of community building with the goal of strengthening communities in the Negev and in the Galilee. We toured the student village built by the volunteers out of natural cement blocks made out of the desert sand. We met with young people who had grown up in Tel Aviv and Haifa, who have made the commitment to settle in the Negev after they finish their degrees at Ben-Gurion University (BGU). Many of them have been inspired by extraordinary faculty like the ones we met at BGU who, in addition to being first-class scholars and cutting-edge researchers, model what it means to be involved with their community.

Thinking about both President Peres and the young chalutzim of Ayalim, one of the rabbis quoted the verse from the prophet Joel: "And your old shall dream dreams, and your youth shall see visions" (Joel 3:1).

Those dreams and visions continue to animate this wonderful, complicated and confusing place that matters so much to each one of us. It was a privilege to be part of this mission and to stand together with my colleagues to reaffirm the oath that Israel really matters to us all.



## Cross-Denominational Unity May Yet Redeem Us

by Rabbi Adam Kligfeld, Temple Beth Am

We came to this experience unified by our support for Israel; we emerged from the experience unified by the concept of unity itself. It ought to be self-evident that Jewish leaders, Jewish communities and individual Jews themselves should seek out, and build off of, our shared narrative, cooperating and coalescing to create strength and vigor. And yet, such coalescing among the varied denominations, and even often within any one denomination, happens far too infrequently.

The bonding that took place over a few days among 18 Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rabbis might have taken years (if it would have taken place at all) had we never left the milieus of our own congregations and agendas. Now I hope and pray that our coming together on behalf of, and within, Israel will be a jumping-off point for the type of partnership that the Jewish world desperately needs, the type of partnership that could herald, if not of itself define, the redemption of our people.



## Our Conversations Bred Powerful Connections

by Rabbi Denise L. Eger, Congregation Kol Ami and president of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California.

It was a whirlwind of a trip. I have never been to Israel for only 58 hours before, but this was the window of time our Los Angeles Rabbinic Unity Mission was on the ground. Eighteen rabbis from three denominations — Reform, Conservative and Orthodox — were brought together with the leadership and vision of our consul general, Jacob Dayan, to bring a message and spirit of unity to Israel and to the Los Angeles Jewish community.

For me, the jam-packed hours were surprisingly energizing as we met wonderful people in Israel, learned of important initiatives, and as we deepened our relationships with one another. A highlight was our meeting with President Shimon Peres, who, at 86 years of age, has an enthusiastic vision of Israel's future. He was curious about the number of women rabbis serving in Los Angeles. He was also clearly pleased by the interdenominational makeup of our delegation and said that we were modeling a vision of peace and hope that Israel must strive for.

But the most powerful part of the trip was the talk among my colleagues during our intense time together. This was truly a different kind of opportunity to share our love of Israel and our passion for the Jewish people and Judaism. Even while we might express it differently, it lays the groundwork for deeper cooperation and understanding. God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. Perhaps so too out of this whirlwind of a trip.

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