Israel 2007, World Mediation Conference, Seeing Some of the Country

Originally Jerusalem didn’t seem to me the best location for this conference, and I didn’t want to go because the government there seems bent on brutal collective punishment in dealing with Palestinians. But I have enjoyed previous such conferences and finally decided that it would be a chance to see some of Israel and clarify for myself what is going on there.

And as is so often true, the people turned out to be very helpful and friendly. English seems to work pretty well with everybody, although most speak Hebrew among themselves and have a strong accent when talking English. The cab driver who took me from the airport to my first hotel in Tel Aviv at 4:30 in the morning talked about what a great city Tel Aviv is, “Going all night,” he said. “You can do anything you want now – drink, dance, get a kabob.” He shook my hand after I got out and welcomed me to Israel.

I was able to get a few hours of sleep, arose about 10:30 and had some breakfast in the hotel lounge (too late for regular breakfast). It overlooks the beach and the waves and is quite nice. Hotel is on big city street, but the street is below and mostly hidden, so it seems you are on the water. Lot of sail boats, and some bathers. It looks a lot like a resort town, although it definitely is not, being a working town that developed without much money in the beginning, and has a lot of seedy areas that I saw from the cab coming in.

When I went out and explored I found the beach to be quite wonderful. Water looks clean, and lots of people swimming, with guard stations and their rescue boats all along the beach. Sand fine and white, even, smooth bottom out into the water – but I didn't yet have my trunks on. So I
came back in to change, then go out. The water is very mild, the "surf" has a few bumps that surprise you if you are swimming, but otherwise mild – beach about as far as you can see. Lots of locals out. Young and not-so-young men hitting the little rubber ball with over-sized ping pong rackets – really pounding it back and forth – not missing much – they must do it a lot. Frisbees. And a soccer game at the water’s edge. The young men (and not-so-young vigorous types) really go at it – whatever they are doing – very intensely, yet quite friendly and polite if you get in their way or cross paths. Real beach life of perhaps working people, not the narcissists of a resort area.

The long avenue at the water front is a splattering of high-rise hotel and apartment structures. Each building has some interesting features, but they are more ugly than pretty. Looks like another case of development in a bit of a hurry. One or two blocks back from that are also fairly modern, blocky businesses and apartments, and another block or two further back is the older part of town that is comparatively run down, occasionally softened when the streets are lined with trees. LOTS of concrete, not all of it looking so great. Modernism that needs some inspiration and a bit better upkeep. In that sense it is typical of so many cities.

I went to dinner at a bistro recommended by the guy at the desk, and it was very pleasant with good food. Israeli wine, which I had no previous knowledge of, is quite tasty, in the style of California wines. I got a free glass of cava because I brought a card from the hotel. The people are very efficient, but unfailingly friendly and much less formal than Europeans. The man checking to see if you have any bombs in your bags at the entrance was from Belfast, though he has been here 25 years, and it was fine until recently, he said. I presume he meant since the last Intifada started.

The hotel is directly south of the U.S. embassy – a huge concrete block of a building with antennas sprouting in all directions. Given the world’s love for the U.S. I don't suppose this is really the safest location. No evidence of guards as with the embassy in Prague, but lots of huge iron fixtures to prevent vehicles getting close.

Tomorrow, depending on how early I awake, I might hit the water again. With such a nice beach my interest in exploring historic districts fades. I have to make my way to Ein Gedi in the Judean Desert on the Sabbath, and it is more difficult because most public vehicles don’t run until evening, evidently. May have to go back out to the airport to get a shuttle. We will see. These Israelis being such determined business people, I would think that a few non-observant types would be offering travelers what they need even with Shabbat.

Breakfast buffet today had salads and fish plates that defied description. I tried a number of things I wasn’t exactly sure of, including a boiled egg that was of a reddish-brown shell color and the inside was also of a different tinge. It was like chicken egg, but must be from some other bird. Chocolate cake was good and not over-sweet, and coffee okay.

Had to go to the airport and then find the shuttle. It runs every day. Met up with some of my fellow conferees who had just flown in – Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain. We had a
nice long ride to get acquainted. The land is flat until you get near the desert, then rolling hills of what looks like beige dirt which must, underneath, have some rock to hold the shapes. I was most struck by the wall or barrier fence we saw at several points, dividing the Israeli state from the West Bank occupied territory. It is going up fast – concrete slabs in some places, wire fence in others. It is not pretty, but is said to reduce terrorist attacks.

The other thing we saw as we got closer to the east side of the country were little Bedouin settlements off to the side of the road in canyons – very impoverished – a few goats or donkeys (rarely a camel), shacks with corrugated roofs. We learned later that these are people who have refused to join the seven official Bedouin towns that the government set up when many of these people were moved from their tribal lands or forced to stop a nomadic life. Evidently they were allowed to stay put if they settled on land useless to the Israeli state, but they would never own their land and have no easy access to government-provided services, like water, sewer, health care or schools. It is not clear why they remain inside Israel rather than moving just a few kilometers to the occupied territories.

We saw lots of the Dead Sea, half a kilometer below the level of other seas. The level of the water is very low and getting lower, and they worry that it will eventually dry up completely. Jordan is visible on the other side of the sea.

We arrived at the Ein Gedi kibbutz hotel by driving up from the desert and coast of the Dead Sea on a short dirt road with rocks and sand everywhere, arriving into a tropical garden atmosphere. It is an oasis that has sources of water, but these would not be enough to produce the enormous numbers of trees and shrubs that are there. It has been planted and tended, nurtured and developed into acres of green luxury through careful grouping of the plants and using high-tech drip irrigation. It also
has a spa, botanical gardens, as well as the small conference center.

Emerging from the super-cooled bus, we found the air very much warmer than in Tel Aviv. Among other offerings in the communal dining room there was fish, and someone asked if it came from the Dead Sea. The server said no, the sea is dead, nothing is alive in it (too much salt). After dinner it had cooled somewhat and, back in my room, I found it possible to open the window and listen to the silence plus breeze blowing through nearby trees. In the morning birds were singing, and I mention this because it is so unusual to stay in a hotel room and hear birds singing (usually all you hear is traffic noise, trash trucks, and air conditioners).

A day of seminars began with an Israeli guy introducing us to sources of cross-cultural conflict and his main example involved misunderstandings between Israelis and Americans. Americans value sticking to their normal roles in order to “get the job done.” Israelis also value this but are more likely to cross boundaries and, for example, to step out of their roles, change plans and schedules, or argue with their bosses than are Americans (and maybe most Europeans). Israelis will loudly object to their bosses ideas in a meeting if they truly feel there is a better way – this is ‘dougrz’ or ‘being straight’ – while Americans tend to save such comments for private discussions and show unity in meetings; Americans might be more likely to make things look good, while Israelis would find it hypocritical. I am oversimplifying here, and there are lots of caveats and qualifications, but the trend can cause a lot of distrust, and often undermines joint projects. The discussion was quite intriguing.

We went on to hear about restorative justice projects, evaluation of mediation effectiveness, and something called Family Group Decision-Making that is used when a family member has been violent. This last procedure was entirely new to me. Evidently in Canada and some other places, in certain cases of family violence a team works with the other members of the family to understand all their options, and decide for themselves, without criminal justice intervention, what plan (including punishment) is best for dealing with the situation so that the family retains autonomy and freedom of choice, remaining as functional as possible. We saw videos and illustrations of the type of family group process they use and it is fascinating. Everyone asks, how can this work without the state punishing the crime and permanently separating the parties? The key seems to be screening the cases carefully and preparing the family members over a period of weeks to consider their options. It illustrates the potential for the naturally-existing community norms to be put to good use, instead of heavy-handed officials intervening in ways that further tear apart families and communities.

The next day we took off by bus from Ein Gedi and headed south to a Bedouin village and listened to the chief of the clan (who is also sheik and judge) tell us how, in a traditional Sulh (or Sulcha) he lays down sentences for murder, theft, rape, illicit contact with a woman from another clan, etc. It is based on generations, if not centuries, of tradition and relies on the communitarian culture of the clan for its validity. For a murder or serious crime they will find guilt and prescribe a penalty (like payment of an amount equivalent to 100 camels), then the state of Israel (depending on the crime) will put the guy in jail for some years, but 1-2 years after the crime the families of the victim and of the offender must come back for a kind of conflict resolution that is supposed to reconcile them and prevent clan retaliation and counter-retaliation in the future. That is very smart, I think.
Then the sheik’s daughter, who is a woman’s rights activist running a school for both males and females (unheard of only few years earlier), tri-lingual (Arabic, Hebrew, English) gave her version. She affirms the value of the Sulh but points out that mediation as taught in the West (which she studied in Canada) can improve the “reconciliation” process that is traditionally required between offender and victim families. Both father and daughter were terrific, despite father's Hebrew that had to be translated into both English and Spanish. They served us a tasty meal before saying good bye. It was an extremely warm and welcoming few hours.

Our next stop was a kibbutz community made up of 100 families who had refused to leave Gaza when ordered by the government to do so a year or so ago, and got forcibly relocated into Israeli territory. They are hard-working as farmers and builders but fixated on permanently taking over the occupied territories and enlarging Israel’s boundaries. The theme of our meeting was, interestingly, that mediation helps in working out regional matters with these people (such as roads, farming issues and water distribution) while leaving aside their fanatical politics. They all seem capable of agreeing on various practical matters while wildly disagreeing on politics. Interestingly they are losing some of their youth who are turning out to be more extreme than their parents – losing them to illegal settlements in the West Bank who plan to oppose any future attempts of the Israeli government to withdraw from the occupied territories.

After a long bus journey through the Negev (south-east part of the country) which is really very stark – miles of flat countryside with little vegetation – as we approached Jerusalem we starting seeing hills, valleys, green, and of course a lot of city-scape. The city is quite a ways up into hills, and the surrounding area looks like a lot of U.S. cities with highways weaving all over, modern apartments and business structures, busses, heavy traffic, and I saw some light rail under construction. The main hotel for the conference is surrounded on 3 sides by highways and is noisy as hell out the window of my room (which is closed but the traffic noise makes it seem like it is always open). Jerusalem (in the new city) is not what I expected. It is much hillier, busier, more modern with wide boulevards and lots of green strips along the roads.

I had managed to eat dinner other evenings with a group of Italian, French, and Swiss women up until this night, now I ate by myself in a kosher hotel restaurant that had not only separate plates and utensils for meat vs. dairy, but an entirely separate dining room for each! It was full of men in kippahs or yarmulkes, many with side curls often wearing their big black hats at the table – very strange to see. Lots of black clothes and very long beards. Their appearance was, of course, totally a non-issue for everyone else. I guess if I lived in New York I would be more accustomed to this, but I haven’t seen it before except in films, and the sight just makes you think how dependent you are on people looking a certain way.
I'm quite impressed with Israel and most Israelis, and with all the culturally diverse stuff they deal with, and how many of them believe the diverse stuff is what teaches them best how to thrive.

The plenary sessions started in the morning. I skipped the local politicians welcoming us and attended a panel of 2 Israelis and a Palestinian who were very clear describing the current situation. One guy said, "Well, in the end both Israelis and Palestinians are going to die, regardless of any resolution or lack of resolution, so we might as well enjoy ourselves as much as we can while we try, and he made some joke that the translator failed to translate (but the Hebrew speakers erupted in laughter).

It is important to stop repeating old mistakes, if a fence is built on the ground it must not dictate our internal dialog and there must not be a fence in our minds, solutions must percolate up from below, not be imposed from above, must learn to walk before trying to run, mediation should prepare society for the time of peace, not try to impose it. They were very thoughtful and seemed constructive, and one common thread was that extraordinary patience is needed, and the politicians lack this. Their only reason for undertaking any initiative is to show short-term, news-worthy happenings that can compete with the reports of blood and destruction that fill the media.

Also quite striking was a statement by a Palestinian (non-Israeli) who has been working for peace for years and, as he says, carries passes and papers permitting him to travel in Israel and the occupied territories. For him to travel from Ramallah (his home in the West Bank) to Jerusalem (a distance of 15 kilometers or 9 miles) now takes from two to ten hours, because of the check points, searches and questioning, and that sometimes he cannot get through at all and must turn back. Despite his work as an official and a negotiator he only attempts the journey when absolutely necessary. This is how hard it is for a privileged and well-connected Palestinian. The average Palestinian living in Gaza has never left his tiny area and knows nothing of the rest of the region, much less the world; likewise those living in the West Bank. Add to this the one-sided views that many Palestinians reinforce among themselves, the education and television biases born of oppression, and it is difficult to imagine where they will find the tolerance and insight to support any peace deal.

I sat at lunch with a guy from Scotland who is Jewish and living here for decades, and told him and another Israeli my "culture-shock" reaction to all the Hasidic people I see. They both said they, too, find them odd. They said these guys don't do military service, collect generous government subsidies, and spend most of their time in the synagogues, supposedly studying the Torah, but who really knows. They are archaic, often quite fat, sloppy, impolite, and they treat women as second class. I was surprised (but somewhat relieved) to hear this from committed Israelis. When I see black hats now on the second day I find myself still gawking, they look so strange to me.

I also attended a school and peer mediation session where a school teacher from Strasbourg described her program, and Israeli women described theirs. They face precisely the issues I remember from the Colorado School Mediation Project – students have typically relied on teachers to decide disputes, teachers reflexively assume authority, the commitment in the schools to the mediation approach needs to develop over years, not weeks or months. Besides resolving disputes the programs raise self-esteem and self-
confidence, increase students’ willingness to speak out, and overall lessening of violence, greater sense of empowerment and autonomy of students. These programs require a lot of time and financial support but seldom get either. The teachers often put in the time for free. They only get financial support when a school has had a violent incident – then the officials want the program right away and find money for it.

This late afternoon I gave my workshop. Not terribly well-attended but it went from 6 – 7:30 pm and a lot of people were, to say the least, tired. I present conceptual metaphor theory and relate it in practical terms to the language used in negotiations. Then I present complex, adaptive systems theory and relate it to managing the negotiation relationship through the use of metaphors. Those present were following my presentation with a lot of interest and, as before, they seem to like the small-group exercises. I was reasonably pleased with how it went.

I departed the sessions the afternoon of the next day, after being there from 10 am, figuring I needed to swim, shower, rest, read, write... before the gala dinner that evening. My Italian friends are thinking of going out to see the town after the gala, and I provisionally said yes, but I doubt I'll want to do anything but hit the sack after dinner and speeches and folk singing, or whatever they have planned.

As good as the conference is, a real high spot was swimming in the outdoor pool of the hotel this afternoon. Hardly anyone there, the sun was descending, the water slightly cool, it was very peaceful – much more so than my room in which the traffic noise from highways provides a constant background. And I needed the physical exertion and moving around after all this sitting in windowless conference rooms.

A guy from South Africa gave an interactive workshop on community-building where the population is diverse and ethnically split. He took us through a structured set of interactions that put people at ease and gradually allow them to connect, person-to-person around universal human experiences. It seemed effective, and he has been doing it for years, even before the change of politics in South Africa. He was another person who reminded us that there is hope for peace in Palestine, based on the successes in places like Northern Ireland and South Africa (Bosnia to some extent).

The food I had in Tel Aviv was really original and good – unique fish dishes, chicken liver, plenty of fresh vegetables. The food at the kibbutz was robust, again much vegetables and fruits and prepared salads. The food in the Jerusalem hotel is plentiful, the fruits and veggies are good, but the meat isn’t – over-cooked, lots of salt. The coffee that is brewed is mediocre but the cappuccino I had in Tel Aviv was decent. We’ll see what they come up with tonight. I’m sure there is excellent food around, but it may mean that I have to go into the old town to find it. And that was the case. When finally the conference was over and I moved into a hotel near the old city, I found excellent and reasonable restaurants for my two remaining nights.

To start the touristic part of my Jerusalem visit I took a taxi to the Jaffa Gate of the old city. The new city through which we first drove has lots of wide boulevards with vegetation and nice surroundings. I saw a huge park on the way. The hills are everywhere and you can hardly go anywhere without a steep ascent or decent. I thought of San Francisco, but there are no trolleys or trams.
At the Jaffa Gate I got a map of the old city and starting ambling around. It was tourism by long, long walks. I found a couple of things I was looking for, but spent untold time walking through narrow market alleys like the ones in Fez and Marrakech, then exited the old city via the Damascus Gate and found the American Colony Hotel, which I had heard was a good spot. Although lovely, it wasn't in an interesting area as I had hoped.

So I hiked from there (the Arab quarter of the new city) to the Jewish quarter, but took one of my famous shortcuts and walked for many kilometers through a black-hat ghetto (an Hassidic quarter). I really wanted to get away from these people since they are very prevalent in my current hotel but, alas, I was completely surrounded by them as I trudged on. They are entirely non-threatening and didn't seem at all surprised to see this one European-type tourist walking down their (rather dingy) streets. After this long, forced intermingling I felt more at ease around them.

Finally, after consulting my map like a confused Mr. Magoo, I found a district that had some possible hope of being genteel and comfortable for the likes of me (wine-swilling yuppie with no side curls, happy to eat meat and dairy from the same plate). The area was packed with hyper-modern stores that are oh, so brightly lit, the restaurants, if that's what they are, are slick and brassy, without any of what I would consider "class" or charm. Finally I found a nice French-style place and had a very good, cleverly prepared dinner. It was fresh green asparagus in an onion and something sauce, followed by lamb ground and then grilled, dropped into a garbanzo bean, carrot and zucchini stew, washed down with an Israeli cabernet-merlot blend. I felt well cared-for and escaped for 220 shekels (about $54).
The next day took me to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which contains the stone believed to be where Jesus was laid out after the crucifixion (in the photo a woman is touching it with her hand).

I visited the Western Wall where people were praying, sometimes with their noses right up against the stone, or sitting on benches reading scripture. I just waltzed in like it was some kind of park and a guy trotted after me saying “kippah, kippah,” until I realized I had to go back to the entrance and get a paper cap to cover my heathen head. Tried to get to Temple Mount but, because of attacks, it is now open only two days a week, neither of which was today.

To finish off, I must say that the kinds of diversity in habits, styles, preferences, etc. that Israelis encounter (original Palestinian Jews, Bedouins, Palestinian Arabs, newly arrived Ethiopians, Russians, and you-name-it – all Israeli citizens) with their various secular or religious persuasions makes our concerns about foreigners pretty insignificant. The Israelis I’ve talked to just take it as a matter of course that they will continuously be dealing as peers, superiors or subordinates (in-laws, neighbors, etc.) with people’s habits and preferences that are (a) irrational (b) unconscionable, (c) threatening, (d) funny... and so forth. Their strategy is to bypass the problems until they can talk about it respectfully, making a safe distance as necessary, and then take as much time as needed, assuming the other person believes s/he is right and so you must try to be respectful even when no resolution occurs for years!

If they don’t agree on the major issue they will work to do the things they can agree about. I admire their perseverance and how much they value diversity. Many say, in effect, just give me more diverse people to work with because we all grow so much from working out the problems, and it gives us the foundation we need for sustaining the peace we will eventually have in our country. This is quite different from the official government line and that of certain outspokenly intolerant people.