Participant Reflections:
Temple Congregational trip to Israel, October 28-November 7, 2026

Rabbi Maya Glasser: "It was a dream fulfilled to bring my congregation to Israel for the first time, and for Congregation Ahavath Chesed to travel there as a group for the first time since anyone can remember. We spent time in Jerusalem, in the north of Israel and in Tel Aviv, with day trips south to tour Masada and the Dead Sea, and visit some sites of the October 7, 2023 terrorist attacks. It was magical to return to our homeland, to hear Hebrew all around us and witness the entire country stop on Shabbat.
What stood out to me in this moment was the humanity of the Israelis; far more than the headlines and sensational coverage that we receive across the miles, they are real people striving to maintain a sense of normalcy during these years of conflict, when many have turned against them. They spoke of their very human emotions during a time of turmoil: feeling isolated, and being anxious about what the future holds, while also sharing their immense gratitude for us making it there and supporting Israel with our presence. This trip emphasized the profound connection between Jewish people and Israel, and I look forward to many more congregational journeys in the future."

Temple President Cathy Winterfield: "Two very powerful impressions for me. One is what I have come to think of as the kavanah of our group throughout the trip. We were intentional in our care for each other, we shared in the power of prayer and song, everyone's heart was open to our love of being together. There was a shared mutual respect and consideration for our differences. Our Rabbi brought that essence by her leadership.
The second but equally powerful was at Caesarea on the shore of the Mediterranean hearing the singing of Eli, Eli. - Just to think that Hanna Szenes, poet, freedom fighter, paratrooper, wrote Eli,Eli in that place: "O Lord my God I pray that these things never end…" Our Rabbi sang Eli, Eli, not just to us but to the whole amphitheater with its almost perfect acoustics. The crowds quieted to a whisper listening to her magical voice sharing the hope and resilience of a young woman executed at the age of 23 after parachuting behind enemy lines in Hungary. At the completion, there was a profound silence and then an explosion of applause and cheers among the tears!"

Ana Delic: “A quote we saw on the trip at Anu museum by Vicki Baum says, "To be a Jew is destiny". Never in my life did I think I would have the opportunity to go to Israel, and it was beyond my comprehension how I managed to navigate all my health issues and limitations but Hashem made a way through your consideration, the generosity of the congregation and the scholarship sponsor. As a conversion candidate, this opportunity strengthened my perseverance and desire to be a part of the community and an advocate for our congregation, everyone we met there and Eretz Yisrael as a whole. My favorite places were all the museums, the dead sea, Masada, Kotel, roof top in Jerusalem and the markets in Tel Aviv. All the food options were sensational.”

Jeff DiSandro: “This was my first trip to Israel and it was amazing. One of the best parts was the amount of things we got to see as we traveled from the north to the south and the east to the west! Northern Israel was my favorite part because of the deep history and it was absolutely beautiful. It was also very good to hear about progressive Judaism in Israel. Meeting with reps from both the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism and Hebrew Union College was a special experience and overall very encouraging. The other part of the trip that was amazing was the group of people who decided to go! What a tremendous community and a special group of individuals. Coupled with the constant educational focus from Doron our tour guide this was a top tier trip and something I will remember forever. Also, special thanks to Rabbi Glasser for facilitating such an amazing experience.”

Danielle Gavronsky: “Our community trip to Israel was an experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. I returned home with a deeper connection to my Jewish identity, my heritage, and a greater appreciation for what it means to belong to a community. Growing up in a small town in Northwest Indiana, where the Jewish community was very limited, I didn’t always have the opportunity to experience that sense of connection. What surprised me most about Israel was the overwhelming feeling of love, acceptance, and belonging I experienced simply by being Jewish. For the first time, I never felt the need to hide my Magen David or my Hebrew name necklace. I could just be Jewish, openly and proudly, without hesitation. There is something incredibly profound about visiting a country that has endured so much, yet feeling a sense of safety and belonging that I haven’t always experienced at home in America. That feeling is something I will never forget. Beyond the places we visited and the history we experienced, I am equally grateful for the friendships formed and the unexpected connections made within our group. What began as a community trip became something much more meaningful. I came home with more than memories and photographs. I came home feeling more connected to who I am, where I come from, and to a community that is much bigger than myself. Most importantly, I left Israel knowing that I never have to apologize for, diminish, or hide any part of my Jewish identity. That is a feeling I will carry with me forever.”

Goldie Lansky: “It’s always a challenge to put into words the emotions, smells, tastes, experiences (large and small, anticipated and just happened) the learning, the sites and just being there. I was struck by the sadness that prevails. Israelis are weary. Too much uncertainty with no end in sight. Too many serving in the IDF for too long. Too many war wounded physically. Everyone wounded emotionally. The election results underscore the divisions within the country and provided no clear direction for the immediate future. Yet everyone “soldiers “ on, every pun intended. While this was hardly my first trip, it was my first synagogue based experience. Such an opportunity to bring together members who might not know each other.”

Melissa Madani: “I want to express my deepest gratitude for the extraordinary opportunity to travel to Israel with our Jacksonville community. This was truly a life-changing experience, one that touched me spiritually, emotionally, and personally in ways that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. I am so grateful to have been included in this journey and to have shared such a meaningful experience with my Temple family.

Returning to Israel brought me an incredible sense of peace and belonging. There is something profoundly special about being in our homeland, surrounded by its history, its people, and the unmistakable spirit of Jewish life. One of the most inspiring experiences was visiting the Reform synagogue in Shoham. Witnessing such a vibrant, welcoming, and deeply committed community was incredibly moving. The congregation's warmth and enthusiasm, coupled with the dynamic leadership of Rabba Rinat, demonstrated the strength, relevance, and beautiful future of Reform Judaism in Israel. It was a powerful reminder of how Jewish communities, wherever they are in the world, are connected through shared values, faith, tradition, and purpose. Equally meaningful, though profoundly difficult, were our visits to the memorial sites honoring the victims of the Nova music festival and the October 7th terrorist attacks. Standing in those places, surrounded by the memories and stories of innocent lives lost, brought back the emotions I associate with visiting the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek. Although these tragedies occurred in very different chapters of Jewish history, both experiences confront us with the devastating consequences of hatred and antisemitism. They remind us of the importance of remembering, honoring those we have lost, standing together, and ensuring that the stories of the victims are never forgotten. These visits were heartbreaking, but they also reinforced the resilience, strength, and enduring spirit of the Jewish people.

What surprised me most about this journey was that, despite the sadness and heartbreak I experienced at these memorial sites, I left Israel feeling even more connected to our homeland, to the Jewish people, and, perhaps most importantly, to my own Jewish community here in Jacksonville.

M. Madani, con't: I returned with a renewed appreciation for the role our Temple plays in keeping us connected, supporting one another, celebrating our traditions, and ensuring that Jewish life continues to thrive. I realized that our connection to Israel does not end when we board a plane home. It lives within us and becomes even stronger through the communities we build and nurture wherever we are.

I cannot adequately express how grateful I am to have been invited to share this journey with my Jacksonville community. The friendships, conversations, experiences, and memories created along the way will remain with me forever. I felt so much peace being back in Israel, and leaving was much harder than I anticipated. My heart was full, yet heavy knowing I was saying goodbye to a place that feels so deeply connected to who I am. I am already looking forward to returning soon. Rabbi Glasser, thank you for your leadership, thoughtfulness, and for helping make this extraordinary journey possible. To Congregation Ahavath Chesed, thank you for creating an opportunity that brought our community closer together while strengthening our connection to Israel and the Jewish people. I will forever hold this trip close to my heart. I returned home with a deeper sense of belonging, a renewed connection to my homeland, and an even greater appreciation for the Jacksonville Jewish community that I am fortunate to call my own. With heartfelt gratitude and appreciation."

Laura Miller: "As you know this was not my first time in Israel, not even my first time on a "synagogue " tour. But this time I saw what I hadn't seen before. Obviously the October 7 memorials were new, and very emotional, but what really struck me was the visit to V'ahavta congregation in Shohan. The warmth of the people we met, the courage and enthusiasm to be the pioneers of this endeavor, made me almost wish I were younger enough to join them. (Almost). It's always good to be "seen" and recognized as a "viable entity". Israel does that. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking us on this trip of a lifetime. (The total cohesiveness of the group was outstanding; not a crab among us!)"

Brenda Pollak: "The Temple trip to Israel was the trip of a lifetime for me. What a thrilling and meaningful journey, filled with a wide variety of sights, cultures, feelings, insights, and spiritual moments. To be led by our amazing Rabbi and travel with a group of old and new friends added to the experience. I hope everyone will go and see for yourself what it is like to visit Eretz Yisrael!"

Bruce Rifkin: "Never in a million years did I think I'd find a more touching moment than my prayers at the Western Wailing Wall. Yet when I visited the Holocaust Museum and the Nova Festival Memorial, I found those moments so poignant, it brought tears to my eyes".

Marty Schwartz: "My parents, Sheldon and Marilyn, always wanted to visit Israel. They never got to do so before they passed away. Health issues and finances always got in the way. So, as part of my trip to Israel, I wanted to bring a part of them along somehow and share the experience. I chose three photos of my parents from among the dozens my mom collected in photo albums from their Caribbean cruising days. These showed them in happy times - boarding the ship in coordinated red, white, and blue outfits and dressed sharply for formal night dinner. I decided I was going to leave these photos in the Kotel Wall in Jerusalem.

On our first Saturday in Jerusalem, our group visited the Wall. I put on my tallit and kippah, the ones my father's parents, my grandparents Hannah and Louis, brought back from their 50th anniversary trip to Israel in 1972. The same tallit and kippah I wore at my Bar Mitzvah, my wedding to Sondra, and the Bar Mitzvahs of our three sons. I walked to the men's side of the wall. It was surprisingly emptier than I imagined it would be. Being Shabbat, the Orthodox were davening off to the left inside the synagogue. I took out the three photos from my tallit bag, kissed them, folded them neatly and placed each at different spots in the wall. The pictures joined thousands and thousands of other little white notes placed in cracks and crevices all over the wall. I touched the wall and said the Mourner's Kaddish quietly. I then ended with "Hi Mom and Dad. It looks like you finally made it here."

Sondra Schwartz: "As far as the trip I found meeting the various advocates at the Supreme Court and discussing the civil and religious rights challenges they are facing eye opening."

Vince Weldon: "This was my first trip to Israel, and I appreciated the opportunity to experience many different parts of the country. Historic Jerusalem, modern Tel Aviv, and the rural North each offered their own distinct experiences and sights, yet all shared the strong sense of community and solidarity of the Israeli people. A personal highlight for me was our first full day in Jerusalem, walking through the streets of the Old City among the multiple coexisting faiths, praying at the Western Wall, and climbing to the Mount of Olives, all while feeling the immense weight of the history that has taken place in the city. The trip was an incredible experience and I would love to return and do it all again."

Heather Weldon: "Ever since I was a child in religious school, I dreamed of visiting Israel, praying at the Western Wall, and floating in the Dead Sea. To finally experience those moments was truly special. Praying at the Wall was probably my favorite part of the entire trip. I also loved exploring Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and enjoying Israeli "ice coffee" at every opportunity. Another unforgettable experience was visiting Masada, where I had the chance to speak with a rabbi who was scribing a Torah in the ancient synagogue ruins.

H. Weldon, con't: I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Glasser for creating such thoughtful experiences throughout the journey, especially the rooftop sunset Shabbat service where our group came together to say Kaddish in my father's memory, who passed away shortly before the trip. It was a beautiful and moving moment that I will never forget. Everyone at Temple feels like family to me, but sharing our experiences in Israel created a special bond among our amazing and fearless group that I will always remember."

Gaby Young: "My time in Israel was an incredibly meaningful and memorable experience that allowed me to connect more deeply with my Jewish heritage, history,and faith. Visiting the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) was especially moving, as I was able to reflect, pray, and feel connected to generations of Jewish people who have visited this sacred place before me. Another powerful experience was visiting Yad Vashem, where I learned more about the Holocaust and the millions of lives lost. It gave me a greater appreciation for the importance of remembering our history and honoring those who came before us. I also had the opportunity to learn about the Reform Jewish movement, its beliefs, traditions, and how it continues to shape Jewish life today. Overall, my time in Israel helped me develop a stronger connection to my identity, gain a deeper understanding of Judaism, and appreciate the importance of preserving our history, traditions, and faith.

There were so many highlights throughout the journey, both educationally and personally. Visiting the museums, especially Yad Vashem, and seeing the October 7th sites were incredibly powerful experiences. I was surprised to learn the efforts being made and accomplished by the Jewish Reform movement. Hearing of the legal road blocks for Reform synagogues to hearing from the champions of the movement and the culmination of attending Shabbat at an established Reform synagogue was a highlight for me as well. Another highlight was our adventure in the Golan Heights, including the Jeep tour and wine tasting. It was wonderful to experience a different side of Israel, take in the beautiful scenery, and enjoy some of the country's unique experiences. I also appreciated learning from our tour guide, who was extremely knowledgeable and provided valuable information throughout the trip."