

## Essay about The Holy Land

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I was asked to share my thoughts, or at least some of them, about the “Holy Land,” whose significance is intrinsically linked to Jerusalem. I studied the map of the world in minute detail and there it was, right in the middle, a tiny dot, a sort of “navel of the earth,” where all the energies of the planet and of humanity converge. Of course, I am neither the first nor the last to make this observation and I wouldn’t like to pass judgements here and now. Much has been written, research has been carried out, prominent specialists in various fields of expertise constantly publish their opinions, ideas clash, notable historians address the informed and also the less informed if they are receptive. Libraries are overflowing with books and the Internet is an easily-accessed, inexhaustible database with a rich range of websites, Wikipedia and YouTube being but two examples of the most frequently consulted virtual information sources. And since I mentioned that, I highly recommend Carmen Ion’s travel diary, a generous and entertaining guidebook for tourists, one of the best documented and comprehensive I have ever read.

I must add that with these few considerations, I don’t mean sound competitive, or undermining, nor do I wish to add something to what has already been formulated. Rather I make them as someone who, aided by her own education and experience, tries to explore and comprehend this remarkably unique historical and spiritual phenomenon that has long been laboriously and competently studied by so many prominent specialists in all fields of

knowledge. Again, I’d like to underline the fact that everything I have written here is purely subjective, and it represents an attempt to express in an honest and unprejudiced way my personal opinions and feelings.

I was raised in a family where belief in God was in the air that we breathed in and religious traditions were the oasis of light and love that guided my first steps, my father being an Orthodox priest. Outside the family nest, the communist dictatorship, with all its negative but also positive implications, has instilled me with habits and practices of a certain kind and fed me illusory hopes. With no intention whatsoever to undermine the social impact of my teachers, colleagues and friends, I must say that communist Romania, a militant of atheism, made me turn away from religion and embrace instead faith, certainty, and love, which were sometimes perceived in a biased, naïve way. In addition, I was exposed to conflicting situations, confronted myself with perplexities, and engaged in tireless searching.

Nothing is accidental. Everything connects. The fact that I left my homeland at the age of thirty-two, after my husband and I had decided to emigrate with our two children to Israel, is somewhat predestined. Somewhere in the innermost recesses of my mind, this longing has always seemed to exist. As I child I was taught about the stories in the Bible, I experienced quite early in my life the nostalgic feeling about the ‘Holy Land,’ which, in truth, was something perfectly real. The City of Jerusalem, Lake Genizaret, Mount Tabor, Nazareth, the Desert, the Dead Sea, the Red Sea, all of them existed then, as do today. Romania was then under communist dictatorship and, to most of us, all these were completely inaccessible simply because we were not allowed to travel

outside the Socialist enclave. So, all that was left for us to do was dream about them. We heard, but indeed very seldom, of scientific congresses that were held in non-communist countries and where very few Romanian specialists in various fields, the 'lucky' ones, were allowed to participate. I was thirteen when one of my distant aunts, a pediatrician, was among those who were delegated to participate in a Medical Congress "outside" (that is, abroad), more precisely in Tel Aviv, Israel. She may have been supported by someone in a high position or was simply lucky. As she shared her experiences with us, what she saw or visited there, I was fascinated and I immediately felt, without suspecting in any way what was in store for me, that I too would someday walk those lands. Yes ... I was absolutely sure about that.

And then it happened. It was 1985 and I remember it was a very cold night. A taxi was taking the four of us, my husband, me and our two children from the airport to the Absorption Center in Mevasseret Zion. It was here that we started learning Hebrew and took the first steps to adapt to a completely new world, in truth, to the unknown. We were holding tight in our arms our little boy, two, and little girl, barely one, submitting to fear that pained and paralyzed us. This time, my inherent overflowing curiosity and adventurous enthusiasm, which, in other circumstances, would have inspired me, couldn't appease my anguish. Still ... and despite my confusion, I flinched every time the mileposts or the road signs signaled that we were approaching Jerusalem. The car was running along a road that for thousands and thousands of years witnessed social events with profound future implications. One was the emergence of the three monotheistic religions, which brought about great spiritual elevation but

also painful, violent, and aggressive hostilities. We were in the 20th century and the old dusty road was now asphalted, the donkey cart was replaced by the cab. Maybe the landscape was different here and there but the road looked basically the same. I experienced that strange feeling again when, in the following weeks, on our days off, we got lost along the winding streets of the Old City of Jerusalem or in Nazareth, which we managed to visit due to the intervention of one of our kindhearted relatives.

Our priority was Jerusalem, as it was near the Absorption Center at Mevasseret Zion where we lived for five months. Its very thick and high stone walls were awesome, its evident age being all the more disturbing. We were informed that the present aspect of the walls was the result of restorations carried out after the Six Day War (1967), which broke out as a result of the explicit threats made by the Arab neighbours. The consequence was that Jerusalem became an integral part of Israel. Through deep excavation procedures, the city walls were brought to light and for their reconstruction, the original stone blocks were used almost exclusively. We walked along Via Dolorosa, which is also known as Golgotha or Calvary, at the end of which sits the Church of the Sepulchre. Once, we almost missed our chance to enter El Axa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, which was built on the very spot where Muhammad is said to have ascended to heaven. These objectives are less accessible because the Arabs of Jerusalem are particularly reluctant to receive visitors. We kept a moment of silence at the Wailing Wall, the only one that remained erect after the Romans destroyed the second temple in 70 AD. The original temple, or the Temple Mount, built on the very site on Mount Moriah by King Solomon and regarded by the Orthodox Jews as their

holiest place, was torn down in 587 by the Babylonians. The wall, that has been standing for two millennia, is not part of the temple, but merely one side of the wall that surrounded it. The most sacred site of today's Orthodox Jews, which is actually the only one that is still accessible since the Temple Mount, now belongs to the Muslims and has become a disputed place, often a cause of serious conflicts. After the 7th century, the period of the emergence of Islam, the Dome of the Rock and the El Axa Mosque were built here on the site of the second Jewish Temple destroyed by the Romans. El Axa is the third most important religious site in the Muslim world after Mecca and Medina. The huge gilded dome of the Dome has dominated Jerusalem's landscape for centuries. The dream of every ultra-religious Jew is to see the third Temple rebuilt in the same place, on the Temple Mount, which has still been inaccessible since the 7th century.

The caves in Hebron, where the tombs of the Fathers of Monotheism are claimed to exist (Abraham for Judeo-Christians, Ibrahim for Muslims, and Sarah), a place of pilgrimage and prayer for both practicing Jews and for Muslims, are often objects of squabble, hatred, and conflict. The fact that the Western Wall borders the Arab quarter near the Grand Mosque is also an inconvenience. Archaeological excavations in this area, which would certainly unearth more evidence, are practically forbidden. Much in the same way, the reconstruction of the Third Temple of the Jews, which remains an unfulfilled dream after almost two thousand years, is also impossible.

Old Jerusalem is divided into four quarters: Jewish, Christian, Arab, and Armenian, each with its own history, its places of worship, and its shops and stalls (and I mention here the Arab Shuk, one of the favorite tourist

sites, which still preserves the original ancient oriental trade atmosphere). Via Dolorosa starts from the Mount of Olives, situated outside the walls, and follows the narrow lanes crossing all the quarters. The Church of the Sepulcher, built on the place where Jesus is supposed to have been crucified and then buried, is the final objective. We mustn't forget about the famous Cardo Street, situated in the Jewish quarter, a place that reverberates dynamic commercial activities that date back thousands of years.

The historical sites in Jerusalem and all over Israel, the ancient, medieval cities, the fortresses, the tumble-down houses, churches and synagogues, mosaics, household or religious objects, have been brought to light through archaeological excavations and restorations carried out with dedication and professionalism and, of course, with huge financial investment by the State of Israel.

We used every opportunity to visit as many religious, historical and natural objectives as possible, trying to find out about and, gradually get to know as closely as possible the natural and social environment in which we put our hopes. We began our exploration by visiting the surrounding area of Lake Tiberias (Kineret in Hebrew, due to its slightly elongated shape, strangled in the middle, 'kinor' meaning violin). Located about thirty kilometers from Nazareth, the birthplace of Jesus, the lake is flanked by bare mountains, which are painted purple by the rays of a generous sun, thus offering a unique natural scene. Here Jesus is supposed to have made disciples by choosing them from among the local fishermen; also on the shore of this lake, in Capernaum, are the ruins of the synagogue where he was initiated in scriptural knowledge, and eventually astonished his

teachers with his knowledge. It is in this very synagogue where, at thirteen and following the Jewish tradition, he had his Bar Mitzvah too. The monument dedicated to Saint Peter can also be found here.

I was impressed to see that each biblical place still bears its original name, and it was only after I arrived in Israel and learnt the Hebrew language that I learnt about their meanings too. For example, the Hebrew word for 'Capernaum' is 'Kfar Nahum,' which means 'the village of Nahum,' 'Jerusalem,' 'Yerushalaim,' or 'Ir Shel Shalom' means 'city of peace,' the Gethsemane gardens at the foot of the Mount of Olives, is actually 'Get Shemen,' referring to the oil press where the population of Jerusalem extracted olive oil. 'Golgotha' comes from the word 'gulgolet,' meaning 'skull,' and indicates the round skull-shape mound where Jesus was crucified. Also, 'Bethlehem,' or 'Beit Lehem,' means 'house of bread.' (it was funny to find out that the name 'Viflaim' from the Romanian carols is a distortion of 'Bethlehem'). We also climbed Mount Tabor, and admired, mesmerized, the panorama of the entire valley unfolding beneath it. I could actually picture the scene of Jesus' famous address to the crowd depicted in the New Testament. In every place full of the mystical and historical thrill mentioned in the Bible and other religious writings, you can find a church or a monastery, usually of recent date, built on the ruins of others that were destroyed by conquerors or turned into mosques.

The next step was to explore the regions that are situated farther away from the city of Haifa, where we lived. They are desert regions, whose fascination you can actually experience only when you see them with your own eyes and allow them to touch your heart. We walked along the beach of the

Dead Sea, whose extremely salty water adheres to your skin like oil. Quite near it, we explored Ein Gedi, the oasis with the famous waterfall, frequently mentioned in the Psalms of David. When we visited the fortress of Masada, perched on a completely bare and high mountain, it was so hot that we could barely breathe, but no inconvenience could diminish its grandeur as well as that of the landscape that spreads out beneath it. I saw before me the pain the fugitives had experienced when they arrived here, in these places, and their last moments of life when they all decided to kill themselves rather than let the Roman armies capture them.

We managed to visit the Red Sea too, but it was only a few years later. According to the Old Testament myth, this sea split in two creating a passage corridor for the Jews fleeing Egypt. The event is celebrated at Pesach (the Jewish Passover), one of the three main religious holidays here.

This land, which throughout its entire turbulent history has been confronted with so many episodes of fire and sword and has known so many downfalls but also incredible revivals, was once conquered by the world's greatest empires: Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Byzantine, Arab, Turkish. ... the English mandate ... We ought not to ignore the Crusader expeditions, most of them recorded in various historical documents or confirmed by archaeological excavations and testified by the ruins of fortresses, forts and palaces. These are a few examples of places that best withstood the test of time during various occupations: the site of Timna (Egyptian), Appolonia (Greek), Jerusalem, Caesarea, Zipori, Beit Shean (Roman), the underground site of Akko or the fortress of Belvedere and Montfort (the Crusaders). Archaeological sites attesting to

the millennia-long existence of the Jewish people in the Holy Land can be found everywhere. I will mention here three of them: Megiddo, one of the earliest cities to appear in northern Canaan, Antonia citadel, and the city of David.

The land of Israel is also known for the emergence of a new religion: Baha'i ('baha u llah i' meaning "Glory of God"), It was named so by its founder, Mirza Husayn Ali, and it already has several million adepts worldwide. Originally from Persia, Mirza Husayn Ali tried to unite the world's three major monotheistic religions, an initiative for which he and his followers suffered a lot of persecution, were imprisoned for many years, and were eventually expelled. He was finally exiled to Haifa, in the Turkish Empire, where he died. Today, Haifa is the world centre of this religion. The dome of the magnificent Mausoleum and the splendid Persian gardens built in honour of him have become the very symbol of Haifa. This splendidly designed city stands on Mount Carmel, with a bay at its foot that stretches to the Lebanese border and from which, far in the distance, the snow-capped peak of Hermon can be admired for several months every year. Even Napoleon with his army left his mark there during his conquest campaigns. Near the town of Akko (Acre), there is a huge mound that his soldiers erected one night while preparing to enter a major battle.

In terms of its physical geography, Israel, this tiny strip of land situated on the Mediterranean coast, changes its landscape every hundred kilometers. Green and crisscrossed by many rivers, northern Galilee looks both surprising and remarkable, standing out among the rest of the regions. From this land also springs the legendary Jordan River. Leaving behind Mount Carmel, where Haifa is located, you

reach the vast plateau where the ultra-modern Tel Aviv rises up from the clouds. Then, as you progress passing through the mountains to Jerusalem, and from there you move on towards the Dead Sea and still further on to the Red Sea, the desert begins, stirring and fascinating.

A hundred years ago, these lands were barren, poor, primitive and left in ruins, at the mercy of swamps and drought (not a drop of rain falls here for six months in a row). But what is Israel like today? A charmingly generous garden. I was impressed from the start by what has been achieved here just in a few years. Artificially planted forests, green spaces, ultra-modern cities, highways, state-of-the-art technology in all fields, etc. Of course, one can say that Israel has benefited from huge financial support ... but would such an achievement have been possible without self-sacrifice, skill and plenty of hard work? In a previous article, in which I wrote my impressions of Japan, I referred to the famous cherry blossom, praised by poets and admired by tourists from all over the world, People travel there mostly in April when these trees, called Sakura, bloom. Little is mentioned about the sturdy oleander and bougainvillea bushes which, in an explosion of myriad colors, adorn gardens, streets, and parks, or about those which animate dozens of kilometres of roadside. The sight of them is most certainly spellbinding. In the same way, not much is said either of the ephemeral explosion of flowers that swathe, once a year, the entire desert landscape. And yet ... Once a year the desert blooms.

Every violent passage has left its mark, every stone and rock, if it could speak, would be the undeniable witness of many bloody events that confronted the inhabitants of these lands many times in the past but also of events of profound and unique

spirituality. Specialized historical research has not yet managed to shed clear light on ALL biblical events, opinions clash and fail to prove the validity of ALL the Biblical myths, but each small step forward comes with additional rational explanations that are indispensable to our modern society.

And yet ... Does everything really require rational explanation according to our limited knowledge? There is more and more debate going on around the unknown dimensions that are being investigated by quantum physics. Who knows what lies in store?

When I first visited the famous religious sites, I felt somewhat disappointed because they thwarted my expectations. At every stop along Via Dolorosa, there is a church, each Christian denomination trying to prevail over the rest of the others. Also, in all the Christian cities mentioned in the Bible, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Kfar (which means 'village') Cana, Capernaum, Bethlehem, on the Mount of Olives ... there are churches. They are all of a relatively recent date because those built on the ruins of the original edifices were destroyed during history's heated clashes.

Nothing seemed real. It was like living a dream that was both fascinating and revolting. Wherever you looked, you could see the imprint of modernism, the mark of this society, supermarkets, motorways, banks with ATMs (by the way ... back in 1985, I found these things amazingly new and exciting!) a *mélange* of people of all races, devout and secular. Even if inside the churches or monuments, the ruins of walls eroded by the implacable time were signposted and well-preserved, a certain atmosphere that was too recent, too commercial, diminished or even numbed the thrill of credibility. On the banks of the

Jordan, near Lake Kineret (Genizaret), 'baptisms' were organized for tourists. Everything seemed as if bearing a superficial, mercantile, touristy tinge. And yet, with time, my feelings changed, or, rather, I became more spiritual. As I was sitting in the shade of a thousand-year-old olive tree on the Mount of Olives (the olive tree is always reborn from the same trunk that withers and dies), I looked from afar at the Church of the Nations that lay at its foot. To me, this Church is a symbol of the unity or, at least, the solidarity of the whole Christian world. I let myself be carried away by reverie. I slipped inside myself to clear my mind of contradictory ideas, prejudices and uncertainties and also to ignore the present and I was instantly taken over by an overflowing feeling of peace that came along with a special thrill of energy. I experienced something similar on the shores of Lake Kineret, near the site of St. Peter (one of the twelve apostles of Jesus), and also when I visited the Persian gardens of Haifa. The Massive Church of the Sepulcher with its several altars is awe-inspiring.

The experience I had when listening to the voices that streamed from each altar, in different languages, and celebrating different religious rituals, was extremely positive and stirring, which makes me want to share it with others, too. Probably this synchronism of religious services, sometimes performed throughout the whole year, made this experience unique and filled me with so much hope.

This is the "Promised Land." where, according to the Bible, "milk and honey" are supposed to flow. They would surely flow if this place were not consumed by wars, hatred and the unnecessary shedding of innocent blood. Throughout history, this "Holy Land" has been troubled, scourged by conflicts and contradictions, and has never

truly enjoyed its rightful time of peace and stability. Even today, this country, so remarkably prosperous in so many respects, is an open wound that does not seem to stand any real chance of healing, at least not any time soon. It is a country where love, tears, fear and hatred, as well as ardent and uplifting prayers, all hopeful and trusting, are intertwined and coexist.