

Wandering in the desert

RAFAEL D. FRANKEL, THE JERUSALEM POST

Apr. 12, 2006

It was almost 4,000 years ago that, heeding the commands of God, Moses extricated the Hebrews from the bonds of slavery in Egypt and led them for 40 years through the desert before delivering them to the promised land.

Around the same time, as the Earth's slow wobble on its axis steadily shifted climates worldwide, the Sahara Desert completed its long transformation from a sub-tropical forest to the inhospitable sea of wind-swept sand dunes and parched earth that it is today.

Since then, empires have come and gone, monotheism has splintered into massive waves of religious renewal and a new Israel has risen from the ruins of the old Kingdom in a no-less miraculous manner than its historic antecedent. But all along the way, this sliver of mountains and fertile soil, perched at the crossroads of the world's great land masses, has been embroiled in war.

Aware that these forces of violence would not abate overnight, yet unwilling to allow his days of investment banking in Berlin to scuttle the dream of bringing peace to his homeland, Heskell Nathaniel conceived of a plan. He would bring 10 people together from the most conflicted nations in the world, lead them through the Sahara Desert for 40 - okay, 30 - days, and deliver among them three Israelis (including himself) to the promised land of Libya.

There, they would plant an olive tree from Jerusalem on the shores of Tripoli as a powerful symbol of peaceful coexistence in a region which has rarely realized such a concept in the ages of the human history it has sustained.

"We want to create a brand of hope," said Nathaniel, who fought in an elite IDF combat unit during the Lebanon War. "It's hard work to overcome our prejudices and we, as the human race on this planet, can only survive if we work together instead of against each other. In many parts of the world, people think [in terms of] a zero sum game, and I believe if we are willing to join forces we can succeed together, while if we work against each other there are no winners and only losers."

The group Nathaniel and his dedicated co-workers in Berlin cobbled together to embark on the Breaking the Ice peace mission encompassed a smorgasbord of not just cultures and religions, but world views and political thought.

Despite their disparate backgrounds, the two Israelis, two Palestinians, two Americans, Iraqi, Iranian, Afghani, and Ukrainian shared one common thread: violence had strongly shaped their lives. Peripheral motivations for joining Nathaniel's expedition varied from person to person. For Ray Benson, a former colonel in the US army who piloted helicopters in Vietnam, and former Ukrainian soldier Yevgen Kozhushko, who fought in the Iraq War, the desert trek provided a physical challenge the two relished.

New York City Fire Dept. Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan had other motivations.

"I feel like I'm representing all my brothers who died on 9/11," he said at the beginning of the trip. "Maybe it sounds cliché, but I'm looking to get some answers about why my brother firefighters had to die."

Those aspirations aside, all shared the core belief expressed by Israeli Gil Fogiel around a camp fire one night on

the far eastern edge of the Sahara.

"My personal goal in the journey is not just physical in getting to Tripoli," said the former IAF fighter pilot, who spent two years as a prisoner of war in Damascus after his F-4 Phantom jet was shot down over the Lebanese Bekaa Valley in 1982. "Mainly it's an internal journey within myself of learning, understanding, experimenting and experiencing other cultures. And we have a common goal of transmitting our message to the world."

With that goal in mind, the group of nine - one of the Palestinians did not make the journey after receiving death threats for traveling on a peace mission with Israelis - made their way through deserts in Israel, the Palestinian territories and Egypt, always moving toward the Libyan border.

Though they did not travel on foot and camel like the Hebrews of the Book of Exodus, the days in the two 1960s-era German fire trucks were long and arduous, and numerous obstacles took turns threatening to derail the journey.

While the Hebrews dealt with hostile tribes they encountered in the desert, the Egyptian military police constantly made life difficult for the Breaking the Ice crew. Everything from roads to small tracts of land in the middle of the desert where the group tried to camp were declared "closed military zones." Even short pee breaks on the side of the rural byways prompted questions from the armed escorts, leading to the often repeated joke from Iraqi Latif Yahia: "No peeing, closed military zone."

Aside from their sheer annoyance, the road closures actually induced more than a little desert wandering, as the mission was forced to go from Point A to Point B via Points C, D, E and F.

Like the resentment for Moses the Hebrews developed soon after their hastily arranged exit from Egypt, which they remembered for the comforts of home rather than its many hardships, the lack of good food, soft beds and hot showers provoked many complaints to Nathaniel. The travelers yearned for their "normal" lives. (Of course, unlike the Hebrews, when the group passed through a town, it often stopped at the best restaurant available. There probably weren't too many of those in the time of Moses.)

Onward toward Libya they drove. As the border approached, expectations of the promised land rose. A total solar eclipse viewed from a crater and a land flowing with sand dunes and the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean Sea waited on the other side.

Then a funny thing happened. Instead of God turning only Nathaniel away, as He did Moses, the entire tribe was denied. Was Libya not the promised land?

Had God not heard the cries of the 21st-century Jews who also wished a better life for their children?

Like the two scouts Moses sent into Israel before the rest of the nation was allowed to enter, the Muslims among the group had warned of a negative reaction from the locals. But unlike the scouts who were put to death for not toeing the divine line of a land flowing with milk and honey, the Breaking the Ice experts said, not happily, "I told you so."

Asked how the Muslims knew the Libyans would deny the group entrance, Yahia, the former body double for Uday Hussein who is now a businessman living in Ireland, put it simply: "We understand how Arab governments work, you don't."

Halfway into the month-long expedition, the peace messengers were relegated back to the desert whence they came. Their morale, already fragile, proceeded to crumble. A day after the Libyan denial, the Afghani, Yahya Wardak, called it quits and headed back home.

Though three days in the mystical desert oasis of Siwa placated the group's bellies and need for rest, it did not resolve the schism which developed between the Muslims, Jews and Christians, who had different ideas about

how much they should endure in the name of peace. And what was there to do now, for that cause, if they could not plant the tree in Tripoli?

An idea was hatched from the most unlikely of sources. The journalist. The fly on the wall. The one who was supposed to observe, not influence, but by now felt too close to the peace messengers to keep his mouth shut, spoke up.

"Why not plant the tree on Mount Sinai? It's holy to everyone and, even better, it's on the way home."

The new plan was for the best anyway, according to Iranian Neda Sarmast.

"There was too much emphasis placed on getting the Israelis into Libya, it was too political," she said, adding that her idea of the mission was to deliver a message of peace to people, not make political statements.

Growing up in Teheran during the Iran-Iraq war dodging bombs, she also took the rejection from Libya in stride.

"I'm realizing more and more that the only way to achieve peace is to really work within yourself as an individual first before you try to change anyone else's opinion," Sarmast said. "You can't begin to educate people, you can't start any kind of change unless you've traveled in their footsteps and understand their lives."

The desert odyssey continued, albeit in dwindling numbers. When the two German fire trucks and support jeep carrying now a total of 20 people, down from a high of 30, had to pass the Red Sea, no miracle was required, just the tunnel under the Suez Canal. Mount Sinai was close at hand.

It is said that among God's reasons for keeping the Hebrews in the desert for so long was the intention that no one born into bondage would bring with him that bitterness into the promised land; that the negativity of those times were necessarily purged from the collective mentality before Jews could take the next step as a nation. So perhaps it was for the good that on a day when the moon moved in front of the sun, blocking out 90 percent of Sol's light and heat, whipping up winds and silencing the birds across the Sinai peninsula, the long simmering tensions between the Muslim and Western camps (the Israelis were caught in the middle) burst forth.

Stung by comments from Sheridan, Yahia twice threw punches at the American leading to the defining moment of the journey. Calls for the Iraqi's expulsion from the trip mounted from the Westerners, and with a word from Sheridan, it may have come to that. Having stared his "enemy" in the face for three weeks now, would the fire fighter's heart harden, sending Yahia into exile and scuttling the peace mission just a day's travel from the revised promised land?

After pondering his options, Sheridan walked over to Yahia. What words were exchanged remained between them alone, but at the end of the conversation, the two hugged and walked back to the group together, smiling.

"It is what it is, I can't hide it, the cultures are very different," Sheridan said later on when asked about the conflict with Yahia. "For me [the expedition] was an eye opener. I really learned a lot, a tremendous insight on Arab people and the way they think. I'll tell the guys in the fire house: 'They are people just like us, they have concerns about families, and they don't hate America like I thought they did.'"

Purged of the poisonous atmosphere brewing in the cramped quarters of the trucks, the final push was made to Mount Sinai.

With a bounce in their step, the group members, sans Yahia and Palestinian Muhammad Azzam Alarjah, climbed the mountain to see the sunrise over the same hills Moses gazed upon during his stay on the holy ground. Hours later, in a full-group ceremony accompanied by many hugs, the tree was planted at the foot of the mountain.

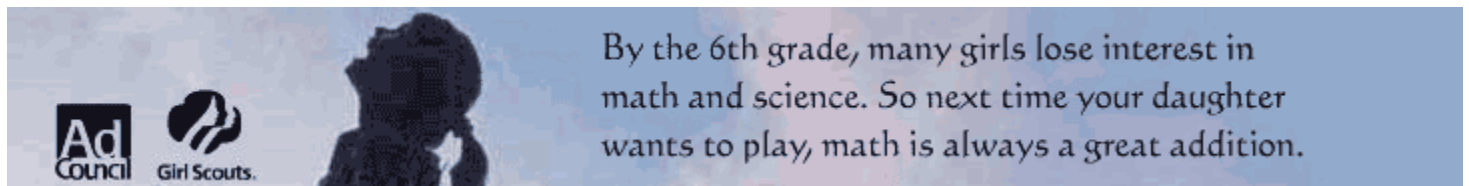
The moment the tree was in the ground a huge weight was lifted off the expeditionaires' shoulders, they said.

Almost instantaneously, an inter-cultural bliss materialized. In the one harmonious act of planting their symbol of peace, weeks of strife vanished.

After 24 days and 4,500 km., the group arrived at the promised land on Mount Sinai. But it was not a physical place they were delivered to, nor would it ever have been. It was the promised land, deep inside us all, which feels that if you will peace, it is no dream.

"It was an extraordinary experience to be with a group of people from different backgrounds, cultures and ideas, and experiencing the conflicts in those differences," said Israeli Galit Oren, who lost her mother in a 1995 suicide bombing.

"The mission is to overcome all that together and to manage the conflict between us. I was more concerned about the inner group than physical journey. It was real. We had conflicts we could manage and conflicts we didn't solve. But there we were, eight people from all over the world, standing together at the end."



By the 6th grade, many girls lose interest in math and science. So next time your daughter wants to play, math is always a great addition.

The advertisement features the Ad Council and Girl Scouts logos on the left. To the right is a silhouette of a girl with her hand to her chin, appearing to be in deep thought. The background is a light blue gradient.

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1143498848009&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

[[Back to the Article](#)]

Copyright 1995-2006 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>