

'Breaking the Ice' for peace through trans-desert trek

RAFAEL D. FRANKEL, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 7, 2006

Shoving off on a journey was never taken so literally before.

With a battery in one of the two 1960s-era German fire trucks - which is to take them across the Sahara Desert - low on juice, 10 people from around the world who were setting out on the journey together had to get out and push their way from Jerusalem's Jaffa Gate until the engine turned over.

It was a fitting beginning to their trip sponsored by the German-based organization Breaking the Ice, which seeks to promote greater peace through individual understanding and cooperation. The near month-long journey will take participants hailing from Israel, the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Iraq, the United States, Iran, and Russia across deserts in Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Libya.

Standing near an olive tree which the group hopes to present to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi upon its arrival in Tripoli, Israeli participant Gil Fogiel said he is bringing a message with him. "I want to ask [Gaddafi] to address his brothers in Iran to follow his example of abandoning nuclear power and pursuing peace and understanding with the rest of the world," Fogiel said.

Turning his attention to the group with which he is traveling, and the inevitable tense moments that will come up, the El Al pilot, who was shot down while flying for the IAF during the Yom Kippur War and held captive for two years in Syria, said establishing a base of trust was the key to bridging their differences.

"From the experience so far, it should be a great success," Fogiel said.

"That doesn't mean everything will be a party, but the people are ready to listen and ready to share their thoughts."

It has been a whirlwind three days for the desert trekkers since they arrived in Israel on Saturday, as they were whisked from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv to Ramallah for meetings with high-level Israeli and Palestinian officials in advance of their journey.

On Sunday, former prime minister Shimon Peres welcomed the participants to Israel with a Tel Aviv press conference where he told them their "heavily symbolic trip" was an important step in the cause for peace.

"A trip to Tripoli three or four years ago would have looked impossible," Peres said. But "the time will come when going to Baghdad or Damascus would not be considered breaking the ice." "Peace begins with one person trying to convince himself it is our only real chance and good option that we as human beings are carrying," Peres said.

The Peres Center is assisting in the group's Israeli activities.

On Monday, the participants went to Ramallah (without Israelis Fogiel and Galit Oren, who were barred from travel by the IDF) to

meet Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas's Chief of Staff Rafiq Hussein.

"[Hussein] was a gentleman to everyone, and sent his regards to Gil and Galit," said Latif Yahia, the Iraqi participant who was once a double for Uday Hussein. Yahia added that Hussein told the participants "we are all people, we are all human, and we all should love each other."

Much of the journey across the Sahara hinges on whether the Libyan government will allow the two Israelis into the country. Though Gaddafi is aware of the group's intentions to travel through the desert to Tripoli, Libyan officials have not yet responded to the group's request for travel visas.

The politics of the journey surfaced in Tel Aviv when Iranian participant Neda Sarmast elected not to sit at the same table as Peres out of fear of the possible repercussions.

"There's so much sensitivity in Iran right now that I didn't want my presence to make a political statement," Sarmast said. "I want this to be a statement of peace, not politics."

The three days in Israel left many of the Arab participants in slight disbelief that they were visiting Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"For a moment it was unbelievable," Afghani participant Yahya Wardak said of sharing a table with Peres. "I wanted to come [to Israel] for a long time because every day we see it in the news and talk about the issue, and here I have the best opportunity to understand the background of the conflict.

"Yesterday, [in Jerusalem's Old City], I heard the sounds of the prayers from the mosques and the gongs from the churches and I

Humor breaks the ice in int'l peacemaking trek

rafael d. frankel, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 19, 2006

THE WESTERN DESERT, Egypt - It took all 10 participants pushing their 1964 Magirus-Deutz truck the first meters from Jaffa Gate to get this expedition to Tripoli rolling.

Eleven days later, battery failure still besets the German fire truck from time to time, but this eclectic group of travelers is too busy laughing with each other to bother helping their lumbering red carrier, which they love to hate, start the day. What, after all, are the drivers for?

After a tense first week in cramped quarters and urban settings, when dysfunction and bickering left two people threatening to leave the trip, tempers have mellowed among the group of two Israelis, a Palestinian, two Americans, an Iraqi, an Afghani, an Iranian, an Ukrainian, and a Tibetan, and their 16-person support staff and media contingent.

The trip is sponsored by the German-based organization Breaking the Ice, which seeks to promote greater peace through individual understanding and cooperation.

Perhaps the serenity of Tibetan Monk Nawang Thapkhe, who meditates in a half-lotus in the back seat and reads Tibetan prayer scrolls at night, is rubbing off on them. Or perhaps the Sahara Desert, with its endless sand, blue horizon, and tradition steeped in perseverance has diffused into the collective conscience.

But more likely, they say, a dark brand of cultural humor - no one is spared from it - which the participants are developing during the long days of travel is both keeping them sane and bringing them together.

"There's a lot of comic relief we're giving to each other," Neda Sarmast, the Iranian, said. With US Army Col. Ray Benson standing nearby she chided, "It's all the Americans' fault." What is the Americans' fault? "Everything," she said, smiling.

A favorite pasttime of the group is using their many languages to push the humor as far as they can take it. Among the results is Thapkhe, who dresses every day in Tibetan robes, saying every few hours in Hebrew "I have cocaine," in preparation for his next encounter with Israeli customs officers in Tel Aviv.

The line, taught to him by Israelis Gil Fogiel and Galit Oren, went even farther today. Thapkhe now knows how to ask if other Israelis want to partake in the drug with him.

"Fun is very important in our lives. Without fun you get mentality disturbed," he said. "A community that is always serious is not healthy."

Fortunately, Thapkhe can dish out the jokes as well as happily be the butt of them. After dinner Friday night, he asked Iraqi Latif Yahia, who has taken to wearing a red Kafiya everywhere, if "Bin

Laden" was finished with his food, sending the group into a fit of laughter.

Nicknames are a big part of the fun.

Yahia, who was once Ude Hussein's body double, is "Iraq Bin Laden." Thapke is "Cupcake." Yahia and Sarmast have taken to calling themselves the parents of Muhammad - the Palestinian participant Muhammad Azzam Alarjah, that is. While Benson has escaped with "The Colonel," Afghani Yahya Wardak is "Baby Ya Ya" because the group says, playfully, that his main habits are sleeping, eating, and whining.

Ukrainian soldier Yevgen Petrovich Kozhushko, who served in Iraq and aspires to serve in the US Special Forces, was dubbed "D.J. Yevgen" after he protested the instructions he was receiving from the group for loading the six-disc stereo.

But most jokes are made at the expense of the support staff, who the participants regard sardonically as their captors. Sarmast tallies the days of the trip in dust on the back of the fire truck, saying that their time in the desert feels considerably longer than the 11 days her finger marks count.

When a reporter asked Oren why she stashed felafel from breakfast in her day pack today, her answer about being a vegetarian and never being sure what the next meal would consist of was quickly followed by a quip from Fogiel.

"Plan ahead, and know your enemy," said the former Israeli Air Force pilot who was shot down over Bekka, Lebanon in 1982 and held prisoner by Syria for two years.

Politically incorrect jokes about Jews and Arabs are common fare now, but the group is seriously considering what would happen if they get to the Libyan border and the Israelis are barred entrance. One of the main points of the trip is to get Fogiel and Oren into Libya, making them the first official Israeli tourists to Muammar Gaddafi's country ever.

They even have an olive tree, named Olivie, making the journey with them which they intend to deliver to Gaddafi himself.

But the Libyan border is still 700 kilometers of sand and two days, desert time, away from here. Until then the serious talks are on the back burner and the participants will continue to bridge their considerable differences with humor.

"We have nothing to do and all day to do it," said New York Fire Department Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan. "It's like in the firehouse, if we don't joke around with someone it means we don't like him. It's all part of our bonding."

This article can also be read at
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1139395630601&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

Former IAF pilot on peace mission to Libya

RAFAEL D. FRANKEL, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 21, 2006

Gil Fogiel sat on the beach here Monday morning, gazing across the bay at this Egyptian city on the Mediterranean when he heard a familiar sound prompting him to gaze upward. Flying overhead were two MIG-21 fighter jets.

"They were at the right distance and position that all my life as a fighter pilot I have dreamed to see," the former IAF F-4 Phantom pilot said.

But as the planes vanished over the desert to the south, Fogiel thought of the mission he is on now, and the difference was striking.

On Tuesday, Fogiel and Galit Oren will attempt to cross the border into Libya 200 kilometers west of here, thus becoming the first people ever allowed into the Arab country on Israeli passports.

They are traveling as part of the Breaking the Ice mission, which has brought together 10 participants from around the globe on a mission of peace, a journey that has taken them through Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Egypt.

The group of two Israelis, a Palestinian, an Iranian, an Iraqi, an Afghani, two Americans, a Ukrainian, and a Tibetan is crossing the

Sahara Desert together to send a message of peace and coexistence. The final goal is Tripoli where they hope to plant an olive tree which they have brought with them, perhaps with Libyan ruler Muamar Gadaffi.

"All my years I've risked my life for the short-term defense of Israel. Now, I'm taking a risk for long-term peace," Fogiel said. "I think that is a far more fertile prospect to take risks for."

What happens when the group gets to the border with its 16-member support crew and media contingent is anyone's guess. No one has travel visas into Libya and contacts through a third party with the Libyan government have not produced any acceptance or rejection of the peace mission.

"It's a guessing game, we'll see what happens when we get to the border," said Director of Operations Adam Rice, who spent hours Monday on the phone with friendly contacts in Tripoli.

By entering Libya Fogiel hopes to turn a new corner in Arab-Israeli relations. "We're welcome into Libya. It's a chance to change the course of thinking and from now on, we've produced a new way," he said.

Fogiel added that he feels like he's representing ordinary Israeli people, who are mostly "skeptical" after the events of the last few years.

"But if you stay all the time skeptical, nothing will ever change, so with this set, we're trying to break conventional thought," he said.

Oren said of herself that she "feels very honored." "I still don't see myself as so powerful in that we are making a difference. But if we do it, we can be the pioneers of change," Oren said. "I want to

represent the Israelis' best side, to come with open hands and an open heart."

"We are giving the Libyans and Gadaffi the chance to change the course of relations, to send the world a message that it's time to change attitudes, forget the past and look for a better future," Fogiel concluded.



Everyone knows who fell in love

Get your exact digital copy of The Jerusalem Post!

THE JERUSALEM POST

Settlers accept deal

This article can also be read at
<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1139395644074&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

[[Back to the Article](#)]

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

Libya: 'We do not allow occupiers into our country'

By [RAFAEL D. FRANKEL](#) ; MUSA'ID, Libya
Mar. 22, 2006 7:12 | Updated Mar. 22, 2006 13:56

"Israel does not exist as a country, it is Palestine, and we do not allow occupiers into our country," was the explanation a special representative of the Libyan government gave the nine-person group of a peace mission for barring their entrance into the country Wednesday morning.

The group, which includes three Israelis, was camped out in the no-man's land between Egypt and Libya after failing to gain entrance to the latter country late Tuesday night.

Latif Yahia, the Iraqi participant who was once a double for the son of Saddam Hussein, Uday, and who functioned as the group's spokesman at the border, was unsuccessful in his effort to persuade the Libyan official to allow them entry.

The group had voted to stay the night at the border and see if diplomacy and their message of good will to all people would gain them admittance Wednesday into the nation which has until now barred Israeli visitors. They have already decided that the group would stick together, even if the Israeli contingent was barred passage into Libya.

Throughout the trek the group had been aware that the goal of ending their journey in Libya hinged on the good graces of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who was aware of the group's intentions to travel to Tripoli.

A statement released by Breaking the Ice, prior to the official Libyan rejection of entry, said that participants were still hopeful they would continue their trip in Libya as scheduled, and arrive in Tripoli to plant an olive tree from Jerusalem, which they are carrying with them.

"We have decided to camp at the border and make our appeal again in the morning to ensure the highest officials will have the ability to make the decision," the statement said.

The near month-long journey took participants hailing from Israel, the Palestinian territories, Afghanistan, Iraq, the United States, Iran, and Russia across deserts in Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Libya.

The Peres Center was assisting in the group's Israeli activities.

Afghan drops out of peace mission

Rafael D. Frankel, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 24, 2006

THE WESTERN DESERT PLATEAU, Egypt - Long-simmering tensions in the "Breaking the Ice" peace mission to Tripoli erupted Thursday, leading to the desertion of one group member but also producing the most intense political discussions yet to emerge from the now eight-person group pieced together from around the world.

A day after being denied entry into Libya due to the presence of Israelis in its contingent and seeing its traveling plans unravel, the group splintered on where it should go. In the end, the decision was made to continue the desert trek in Egypt for the next week, before circling back and finishing the journey where it kicked off, in Jerusalem.

But for Afghani participant Yahya Wardak, the grueling toll of the journey was finally too much to handle, and he announced his intention to leave the mission. Seeking to retain his presence, the group pulled off to the side of the road in the middle of the desert where a dramatic scene unfolded.

As cameras rolled, the participants sat in a circle on the hard, red desert dirt and tried to convince Wardak, who was frustrated by what he felt was too much emphasis placed on bringing Israelis to Libya, to change his mind.

What ensued was the type of conversation the organizers of the group have longed for since this desert trek began two weeks ago, as cultural differences, frustrations and global politics all melded into the narrative.

New York Fire Department Capt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan accused Wardak of "quitting when the going got tough," and implied he noticed a similar trait in other Muslims.

That prompted an impassioned plea from Iranian Neda Sarmast, who agreed with Sheridan's assessment and told Wardak that by quitting he was giving Muslims a bad reputation.

"This is the problem with the Middle East. Whenever anything gets difficult we always break up and never maintain our unity," she said as Iraqi Latif Yahia sat next to her, nodding in agreement.

From there, the conversation quickly turned political, leading Sheridan to mention the 343 New York firefighters, dozens of whom were his friends, who died on September 11, prompting an angry response from Yahia.

'OK, so 3,000 Americans died on 9/11," Yahia, whose sister-in-law was killed in an American bombing raid on Baghdad in 2003, said in a raised voice. "Does that give America the right to destroy my country? A hundred thousand Iraqis have died, and who is next?"

Sheridan responded: "I'm just one guy, I'm not an ambassador of my country. [US President] George Bush doesn't call me when he wakes up in the morning."

At one point during the shouting, US Army Col. Ray Benson went over and placed a hand on the soft-spoken Wardak's shoulder,

telling him the group would miss his presence. "We want you to stay and continue to be a part of this," he said.

But it was to no avail.

So, one person lighter, the desert journey continued Thursday afternoon.

The seven-ton fire trucks carrying the mission made their way down a two-lane barren road to the oasis of Siwa, where Alexander the Great received a fortune from an oracle, who prodded him on to conquer half the known world.

Some things have changed since then and some have not. As the truck convoy stopped alongside the road so a satellite Internet connection could be hooked up for a reporter to send out a story, a camel convoy walked in the distance, probably toward the same destination.

Disappointed, but not deterred, Israeli Gil Fogiel said he was still looking forward to the remainder of the expedition, even if it would not include Libya.

"From the beginning [entering Libya] wasn't the sole goal and also not the important one," Fogiel said. "There are some questions we didn't dare to talk about yet and I think now, including myself, we are ready to discuss some important and interesting issues."

As for Thursday's drama, Fogiel said it was healthy. "In order for every group to really work things out, you need time and detachment from everyday life. You need people to be tired and sometimes fed up with each other in order to, at the end, be real and shed all the veils."

There will be time for that in Siwa, where the group plans to recuperate for the next three days from the disheartening and physically tiring 12-hour ordeal at the Libyan border.

Breaking the Ice: One more leaves

RAFAEL D. FRANKEL, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 27, 2006

In 526 BCE, the Persian emperor Cambyses received a prophecy from the Oracle of Amun located here that his expedition to conquer Egypt would fail. Legend has it that, in his anger, the emperor sent an army of 50,000 men to destroy the oracle. En route, they were swallowed by a sandstorm, never to be seen again.

The Sahara Desert did not engulf the entire Breaking the Ice expedition, but a stop in Siwa has cost the peace mission another member.

the former body double for Uday Hussein, left Saturday for Cairo. He is the third Muslim participant to leave the expedition since they met three weeks ago in Jerusalem, leaving only Palestinian Muhammad Azzam Alarjah and Iranian Neda Sarmast with two Israelis, two Americans, and a Ukrainian.

Before leaving, Yahia said he intended to rejoin the group in Cairo and travel with them for the journey: planting the olive tree from Jerusalem that was meant for Tripoli on Mount Sinai instead. But he has spoken daily of leaving for the last week, and already the group is placing bets on whether he will return.

After being turned away from Libya due to the presence of three Israelis in the group, the new plan was hatched at a meeting late Friday night under a moonless Siwan sky.

"What better place [to plant the tree] than somewhere where all three faiths have claims?" said New York Fire Department Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan. "It's symbolic of bringing the three religions together."

Held amongst torches and sound recording equipment, the meeting was the second tense encounter in as many days for the peace mission which, with its dwindling numbers, is feeling more and more like a Survivor series.

However, in this Sahara Desert version, the tribal council meetings are used to urge members to stick out the journey rather than kick them off the island.

"The expedition is about people from different backgrounds and cultures achieving peace between us," said Israeli Galit Oren. "So many people leaving the group means that we failed to do it."

So then there were seven, and they spent two days traipsing around Siwa by day and camping at a hot spring on the edge of the Great Sand Desert at night.

In the 2,500 years since the emperor's army vanished, few places in the world have changed as little as this mystical desert oasis, which only opened to tourists in the 1980s. With thousands of palm trees and vast lakes suddenly appearing out of the parched Saharan earth, Siwa still beckons the wary desert traveler.

Donkey carts are used to haul goods from the market as well as ferry tourists from the central square across from Abdu's Restaurant through the shade of the drooping date trees. Nearly every woman in Siwa - the locals are ethnic Berbers - wears a blue burka and a stark black veil that completely covers her face, with no eye slits.

The 800-year-old Shali, the old city of Siwa, though mostly uninhabited, still stands in a maze of mud brick that was never rebuilt after the "Great Flood" of 1926, when it rained here for three straight days. The average rainfall here is three millimeters per year.

At sunset, the last rays of the day strike the limestone Mountain of the Dead which peaks above the sea of palms. In dozens of caves dug into its second-tier plateau, some 100 meters below the summit, lay the bones of thousands of Siwans from ages past, open to the air and the dozens of tourists who walk among their graves every day.

Like Alexander the Great, who came in 332 BCE, the Breaking the Ice mission also made a pilgrimage to the Oracle of Amun. Though they did not receive confirmation of their divine bloodlines, as the man who conquered half the known world had, they saw it as a chance to improve their karma before heading back into the desert after the recent trying days.

Desert rain is no surprise to hardened trekkers

rafael d. frankel, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 29, 2006

THE GREAT SAND SEA, Egypt - It rained here Monday. Not just a few drops, but a steady rain for hours.

So what's the big deal?

Asked when the last time it rained here was, local guide Yahia Kandil said: "Maybe three or four or five years ago."

Despite the odds, no one from this expedition was surprised as this peace mission has taken on a "what next?" attitude as it hits the home stretch in its push to plant an olive tree from Jerusalem on Mount Sinai.

The comedy of errors isn't weighing on everyone, though. "It's an adventure," said Ukrainian Yezgen Petrovich Kozhushko, who fought in the Iraq war. "The rain and everything else doesn't bother me."

The rain came on the second leg of a two-day, 700-kilometer push from the desert oasis Siwa to Cairo via the remote Baharia road - "road" being a generous description of the mostly rocky, often

jarring, military checkpoint-laden path which links the Baharia oasis with Siwa.

Before setting out, special travel permits were required. The price, according to Yussuf, the Beduin guide who arranged the permits: \$10 per Western passport, \$500 for Palestinian Mohammad Azzam Alarjah.

Baksheesh?

"It was a mistake," said Sammy, the soldier that accompanied the group on the military road. "This is the price Arab princes on hunting trips have to pay." Can we get a refund? "Ha ha ha," he laughed. So \$700 lighter the group set out, with a half dozen people taking advantage of the slow going to sit on the roofs of the trucks and take in the view of the Great Sand Sea upon whose northern edge the Baharia road runs.

At the first military checkpoint, the group climbed to the summit of a three-storyhigh sand dune from whose vantage point the sea stretched southward as far as the eye could see. Like waves of water, dune after dune crested in this ocean of sand, their peaks and troughs dictated by harsh desert winds and tracked by months rather than seconds.

And then the fun began, with the Israeli leader of the group, Heskell Nathaniel, kicking off the dune tumbling event in the Breaking the Ice Summer Olympics. Down he rolled in a tight spiral with Director of Operations Adam Rice and Kozhushko hot on his tail. At the bottom, the three embarked on a real challenge: standing up without losing balance as cochlear fluid swirled around the inner ear and caused the horizon to do the same in the field of vision.

As the day unfolded, the northern landscape continually changed. Lunch was taken a few hundred meters off the road in an ancient seabed, where shells and stones moved out by eons of water flow lined the earth which comfortably sank a few centimeters with each barefoot step. Under a baking desert sun, mushroomshaped cliffs of fossilized coral reefs spontaneously broke the flat and rolling terrain.

Though the occasional marsh or lake lent a little greenery through the scenes, the roof-top view of the parched earth gave way only when the sun went down and the stars of a moonless desert night appeared in a display of the constellations.

Despite protestations and a warning from Sammy that an investigation was forthcoming about why the group was stopping in a closed military zone, camp was made around 9 p.m. and a few people took advantage of the first windless night in a week to sleep sans tents.

That proved somewhat costly at daybreak when the first raindrops started to fall.

While the locals said the rain was good luck, the constant precipitation meant braking the plans to camp in the desert 100 km. out of Cairo and driving through the mosquito-ridden confines of a hot camp next to the pyramids of Giza. That, and one of the trucks running out of fuel for the second time on the trip, made for a night where many in the group saw the sun before the pillow.

Though the rain and unseasonably cold weather continued through Tuesday afternoon as the expedition drove towards the Suez Canal, one bit of good news lightened the spirits of the peace mission: Iraqi Latif Yahia, good to his word, rejoined the group in the Egyptian capital after a two-day hiatus.

"Back to family again," the former Uday Hussein body double said after receiving hugs and kisses from the group during their Cairo rendezvous.

