

After 24 days, journey ends at Mt. Sinai

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The sun rose above the jagged Sinai Desert mountains Friday, providing a brilliant beginning to the final day of the Breaking the Ice peace mission for the six participants who climbed the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God.

Four hours later, it blazed overhead as all eight team members who hung through the 24-day, 4,750-kilometer expedition planted an olive tree from Jerusalem at the foot of Mount Sinai, marking an end to their desert journey, which saw both intercultural harmony and poignant conflict.

During the first minutes of daylight atop the mountain, Israelis Gil Fogiel and Galit Oren, Americans Daniel Sheridan and Ray Benson, Ukrainian Yevgeny Kozhushko and Iranian Neda Sarmast sat in a row looking down on the Red Sea and the surrounding mountains, posing for pictures with their arms around each other. Fogiel and Oren joined Israeli group leader Heskkel Nathaniel in singing Shir Hashalom (The Song of Peace)."

Iraqi Latif Yahia and Palestinian Mohammad Azzam Alarjah did not make the hike up the mountain, but they were on hand for the tree planting ceremony that officially ended the expedition.

In the garden of the Fox Desert Camp, Alarjah and Oren, who had become good friends during the trip, put the olive tree in the earth together, and the participants, plus Nathaniel and Director of Operations Adam Rice, took turns shoveling soil on its roots.

Speaking in the name of the tree, Sarmast read the following declaration: "For thousands of years, since the beginning of humanity, I have represented peace among people. As I stand here today after my long journey across the Sahara Desert in search of a new home to spread my roots, I invite you to join my worthy cause.

"Standing beside my fellow eight travelers and messengers for peace from various countries and religions, my promise to them is to continue their quest for inner and global peace by giving birth to new seeds of peace for future generations. Their message to the world is a simple one: 'If not me, then who?'"

Fogiel buried two items along with the tree's roots to protect their symbol during what they hope will be many years of life: the torn and tattered Breaking the Ice flag the group had flown from one of two 1960s-era German fire trucks and a Hamsa hand good luck symbol.

The final push to Mount Sinai was no easier than the rest of the journey, with several logistical obstacles and an internal fight that nearly broke up the peace mission with just one day left.

On Thursday, when a partial solar eclipse darkened the sky and seemed to stir heavy winds, the group found itself knocked suddenly out of joint.

During the drive through the Sinai Peninsula, Yahia, the former body-double for Uday Hussein, twice threw punches at Sheridan after the New York Fire Dept. captain told Yahia to stop complaining about the conditions of the journey.

Yahia said afterward that he had made great strides in controlling himself since his escape from Iraq in 1991.

"Everything is cleaned within. It's just the anger which I still have," he said. "Just don't wake the devil."

The fight in the back of the truck was stopped by the other six participants, and the vehicle quickly pulled over to the side of the highway where Sheridan and Yahia were separated.

As cameras rolled, Yahia came out with a verbal tirade and he, Sheridan, and Kozhushko all said they were ready to leave the mission at that very moment. But after tempers were calmed, Sheridan and Yahia made peace, hugging and apologizing to one another. Though shaken, the group stayed intact and rolled on toward their final destination.

However, like in so many instances over the past three weeks, Egyptian police used their heavy hand to thwart the group's plans.

The expedition had clearance to drive on the road leading to Mount Sinai from the west, but police manning the checkpoint changed their minds as the group stopped to pick up lunch, declaring the road unsafe for travel after the heavy rains of the previous two days.

For a few minutes, a not-so-small amount of baksheesh seemed to have cleared the way, but as the drivers turned on their engines, police dashed in front of the trucks, rolling in garbage cans to create an ad-hoc roadblock.

A two-hour drive was thus turned into another full day of travel as the group was forced to make its way around the southern tip of the peninsula and approach Mount Sinai from the east.

One day later, including a rebellion among the drivers - as result of the long hours they were putting in - a broken gas tank, a live video conference with donors in Berlin, a seafood dinner, a hotel breakfast buffet, and seven military checkpoints, the expedition limped to the foot of Mount Sinai, on its physical and mental last legs.

Despite all this, and the countless other obstacles that materialized during the expedition, this determined band of eight people from around the world stood together at the end.

When the last morsels of soil were heaped upon their olive tree and Sarmast had made his declaration, everyone broke out into cheers and hugs. Some were forced to choke back tears as the desert odyssey was brought to a close.

That unity and friendship served as proof of the journey's success, many of the participants said afterward. The group had been hoping to have a final party in Tel Aviv on Tuesday, but visas could not be obtained for Yahia and Alarjah.

"We brought here people from different nationalities, cultures, religions and backgrounds and experiences, and it was not easy but the differences between the people we managed to solve," Fogiel said.

"There were misunderstandings, misbehaviors, all of the usual behavior that we observe in the outside world. In this small universe of us we managed to overcome [these problems] by facilitating, going in between, being imaginative in solutions and ways to solve these problems. And you [saw] every morning people getting on the truck smiling, forgetting the dispute of yesterday - they coexist and they go on," he said.

"We chose a goal common to all of us and we understood that we wanted to achieve this goal, so we cooperated. If humankind chooses some goals to achieve and does the same as we did in our microculture" it could do the same, he said.

So, "having cast a stone of peace into a sea of conflict, this group must now wait to see just how far the ripples will travel," Fogiel said.