

Our Inclusive Israel Trip

By Rabbi Steven A. Chester

Our Inclusive Israel Trip began as a regular congregational trip that I led every three years or so. Two congregants with disabilities who use wheelchairs asked if it would be ok to come and the answer was an immediate yes from me. After all, they were congregants! I didn't freak out because I felt they had as much of a right to go as anyone else. Was I little nervous and concerned? Yes, as I knew I was treading on new ground, plus I wanted them to enjoy the trip and experience what all others experienced.

I worked with ARZA Travel (Da'at) on the logistics of the trip. The representative from Da'at and I spoke by phone many times. They assured me that there were accessible rooms at the hotels and the kibbutz hotel we would be staying at. As far as sights to visit, they couldn't tell me which might not be accessible but assured me that many were accessible. The biggest task was finding a tour bus that had a lift for wheelchairs, and a place for wheelchairs on the bus. After much research, Da'at told me that there were only three such buses in Israel, and that two of them happened to be owned by Arab Bus companies. They also said there would be an extra charge for such a bus—I think it was around \$1,000. I told them to rent the best of the three, regardless of company and cost. Very honestly, that bus was very old and although the lift worked, it proved to be dangerous.

As far as money and the expense of creating an inclusive trip, the only extra charge was for the bus. I took that out of my Discretionary Fund.

About six months before the tour, I was in Israel for something unrelated to our trip, and I met with ARZA representatives in Jerusalem. I scouted out as much as I could as far as accessibility in Jerusalem and a little in Tel Aviv, but not much elsewhere. However, having been to Israel many times before and knowing that the congregants' wheelchairs could handle some bumpy terrain, I thought we would do okay in most places.

Finally, I think the most significant thing is that we were honest with one another. I told the congregants that they needed to understand that there might be some

sights that may not be accessible, and that I was doing my best to make things as smooth as possible. They accepted that, which made things much easier for me. I also told them that the itinerary for the inclusive tour was the one I had used for all of my other congregational trips. They told me that aside from accessibility, they wanted no special treatment. That also put my mind at ease, as the tour had two buses and more than 60 people on it.

I think we were all surprised at how inaccessible many things in Israel were at the time. As a technically advanced country and one that has many people wounded in wars, the country lacked sensitivity in this area at the time of our tour.

If the URJ ever wants to organize an inclusive tour of Israel, I would be glad to help and even lead such a trip.