

## PERSONALITY OF THE MONTH

### Rimon Makhlouf



My home is Jerusalem. This is what I always answer when my tour groups ask me where I'm from. I was born on the Mount of Olives and I have lived in Jerusalem all my life. I grew up in the Christian Quarter of the Old City. My father is buried on Mount Zion and my grandfather's tomb is in the Garden of Gethsemane.

As a child I helped my father, George, when he did contract work at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I was amazed at this holy place and the number of foreigners who came there to visit and pray. I was fascinated by the tour guides, and soon, I followed tourists inside the church and offered to guide them. And so, in the holiest place in Christianity, the place of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, my vocation as a Christian tour guide took off.

It was on February 19, 1980 when I picked up my first group, American Baptists from Cleveland. On our first full day we awoke in St. George's Hotel in Jerusalem to find my beloved city knee-deep in snow. As a Latin-rite Catholic, I took the group on the Via Dolorosa and to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, not realizing that Baptists don't do these things! I had to learn quickly.

A Christian tour guide is different from a secular one. The Christian guide must communicate the Christian faith in the land where it was born. But we are also ambassadors of our land, our people, our culture, our religious traditions, our history, our suffering, and our hopes. As a Christian guide I am a "living stone"

among the ancient stones of this land.

I have worked to pass my experience onto the next generation. After I earned my travel expert license in 1995, I taught tourism at Bethlehem University for twelve years. At the same time, I was able to convince the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, especially during Oslo peace negotiations, to allow Palestinians who lived in Jerusalem to get licensed as tour guides. We developed a program in English, and the first guiding course for East Jerusalem started in 1997. We now have over 300 Palestinian tour guides who are licensed by the state of Israel.

It is estimated that 80 percent of the tourists that visit our beautiful country are Christian pilgrims. As a Christian tour guide, I always make sure to connect them to the land historically and spiritually, letting the Bible unfold as they see places they have only ever read about. To me, it is not only a profession, but also a ministry.

Many of my pilgrims go home and write me thank you letters for helping them strengthen their faith, and also for opening their eyes to realities, which they never knew about because of the distortions in their media. Sometimes I don't even have to say anything.

My home is Jerusalem. And when I receive a group of travelers from anywhere on earth, I welcome them home, for Jerusalem is home to the whole world.