

Spiritual Journeys vs. Israeli Tourism

By Ahmad Damen



Background

The Occupation of Palestine, Al-Nakba, and the expulsion of the Palestinian people did not only affect our material world but also our spiritual culture, a culture that is still under constant threat by imperialist ideology. Although this is not a problem solely affecting Palestine, this land still represents a unique and critical case. First, it is a land with religious significance for the three largest Abrahamic faiths, which all originated in this region. Second, the Palestinian people were faced with drastic external changes more than sixty-five years ago, which left them scattered in different locations and incapable of creating a collective spiritual identity. For example, there are some spiritual traditions that have been preserved in some Palestinian towns beyond the Green Line due to their solitude. These villages are disconnected from the Arab world on one end, and marginalized by the Western world on the other end. This is despite the fact that many Palestinians on the other side of the Green Line are still Christian like most of those in Western countries, but as the article discusses later, spiritual and religious identity are not the same.

Photo from Palestine Image Bank.



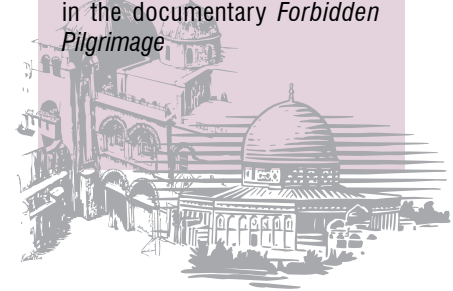
Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

The Palestinian people created a unique spiritual society that encompassed all faiths during a time when Western Europe was occupied with creating a strict religious identity that was lacking in spirituality when compared to Eastern civilizations. Local Palestinian Christians are the descendants of the early believers in Christ and represent an example of early Christian values, according to Christian scholars like Samih Ghanadreh in his book, *المهد العربي*¹, because they preserved many of the spiritual aspects of Christianity that were lost in the European model. During a period of time described by the Europeans as the Dark Ages, Palestine and its surroundings were part of a thriving religious and intellectual culture in which the Arabs interactively connected with the spiritual systems in China, India, Persia, and Central Asia through the historical exchange route, the Silk Road. This led, among many other benefits, to the spread of Islam through trade into eastern Asia and Africa, and the expansion of other Islamic schools of thought, like spiritual Sufism, in Central Asia. This fusion helped to form a unique Eastern identity in Christian communities in Palestine, which continued to preserve that spiritual aspect missing in Christian Europe.

Europe's lack of spiritual depth led to a Cartesian model that ultimately rejected the impractical form of centralized religion and treated spirituality as a

"Often, one wakes up to find an emigration application form at his doorstep stamped by the ambassador or the consul. Just fill in your name and post it. [Israel] does not want any Christians here: neither visitor nor resident. Foreign pilgrims bring a huge income, but they are not concerned with economic benefit. They just do not want Palestine to be a Christian sanctuary. They want to transform it into a Jewish land."

Archimandrite Milatios Basal in the documentary *Forbidden Pilgrimage*



superstition. The superiority of man and the power of the mind swept through Western culture and created something that lacked both ethics and spirituality. This new dogma was capable of producing colonialism and slavery and supporting capitalism. It was the same dogma that ultimately created Zionism, Israel, and the current tourism model practiced in Palestine today.

Spiritual journeys

It is difficult to pinpoint a definition of spirituality, especially for those who do not believe in any higher power or purpose for the universe and life. It is a concept that requires a different dictionary of concepts and language, and if such a dictionary exists, it is not likely to be written in English. However, what seems to be a common



Making of "Forbidden Pilgrimage.". Photo courtesy of Ahmad Damen.

factor is that spirituality is a process of transformation and change that involves experiencing higher dimensions than the ones available through physical perception and our five senses. One simple way to describe it would be as an "elevation" process in which you suddenly realize that the elevator of a three-story building has extra buttons for levels four and five that you did not see before. Once you visit these new dimensions, your whole concept of this "building" and the elevator itself is likely to change forever and this change will have a transformational impact on your life. Despite the lack of tangible evidence that such dimensions exist or that spirituality is crucial, nobody can deny that it provides many people around the world with essential tools. There is sufficient evidence that spirituality changes people's lives for the better and provides an inner peace and satisfaction that is unmatched in a material and desire-driven world.

Spirituality has traditionally been practiced by millions of people through religion, but that does not mean that the two words are synonyms. Many spiritual people are not necessarily religious and vice versa. Followers of a certain religion are more likely to confuse their

internal spiritual needs with the needs of religious institutions, religious clerics, or hierarchies. This sadly deprives them of essential aspects of spirituality, since they lack their own experience of God and their belief system is typically fragile and unstable.

Pilgrimage is a life-changing experience for religious believers and a gateway for personal transformation and connection with their souls and with God. Christian pilgrimage to Palestine in particular is a case I have researched, studied, and observed for some time while working on my second feature documentary *Forbidden Pilgrimage* (2014). More than 2 million Christian pilgrims from around the world visit historical Palestine annually for pilgrimage purposes.

Christian pilgrimage is not an obligation, but many continue to pursue the journey. Writings from foreign pilgrims go back to the early Christians, and despite obstacles that prevented pilgrimage visits at different periods of time throughout history, pilgrims always found a way to resume the trend. It is a chance for many to renew and strengthen their faith and to experience the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage at the highest level possible.

Different Christian churches have different

concepts and itineraries when it comes to the Holy Land (Palestine). Some seek to visit certain sites associated with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, while others prefer to perform religious rituals while visiting. During the research process, I interviewed priests who represent the three largest Christian churches in Palestine (Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical). They all expressed that a spiritual pilgrimage dedicated to unlocking a desired transformation would be spent in worship and service, while following the steps of Jesus and taking part in the life and practices of the local community of their fellow Christians.

Israeli tourism

The Israeli approach to pilgrimage represents a different model from the one suggested above, and is mainly focused on the tourism aspect of the visit. The aim of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism and the Israeli tourism agencies is to maximize their economic gains to an extent, but, even more importantly, their goal is to emphasize their distorted version of history and present a Zionist narrative of the country.

First, they attempt to forbid the interaction between the pilgrims coming from abroad and the local Christians. The Israeli tour guides do so by making the pilgrims afraid of the locals and by spreading false information that was previously prepared for the occasion by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. They even

"I fear for the Holy Land if the majority of the Arab Christians emigrate. The Holy Land will be a museum of holy stones without genuine value. What is the value of a sacred site without its blessed inhabitants visiting it to pray for and preserve it?"

Rev. Riyah Abu El-Assal in the documentary *Forbidden Pilgrimage*



go as far as denying the existence of a local Christian community in Palestine and do not allow the pilgrims to be guided by a local who shares the same faith. It is a no-brainer that, if the guide shares the same faith, he or she is more likely to better serve the pilgrim's needs.

Second, the Israelis have a clear long-term goal to break the special bond that connects local Christians to this land by making their lives difficult. They also continue to facilitate their immigration to other countries with the help of some Western governments. Rev. Riyah Abu El-Assal said in *Forbidden Pilgrimage*

Photo from Palestine Image Bank.





Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

that it would be a great calamity to turn iconic Christian sites like the Nativity Church and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher into museums deprived of their own local residents.

Third, the Israelis limit the time that tourists spend in the West Bank and steer them away from important sites there. Important churches like Jacob's Well in Nablus and the Lepers' Church in Burqin are not part of Israeli tourism agencies' programs. Israel still promotes a fake baptism site near the Sea of Galilee and was only forced to create a new one near Jericho after the Jordanian site was discredited by most Christian churches. They wish to limit the time spent by pilgrims in the West Bank as much as possible.

Fourth, they turn a pilgrimage into an entertainment tour deprived of spiritual essence. Rev. Stephen Sizer compared such pilgrimages to a visit to "Disney World."² Some of the tours now schedule a three-day visit to Eilat in the far South, which has no recorded biblical history related to the ministry and life of Jesus Christ. If we account for traveling time, this takes away five days of their ten- to twelve-day pilgrimages. It is not a surprise that a country that claims to be religious, but in fact has nothing to do with any spiritual doctrine, is unlikely to offer a valuable pilgrimage journey to

Christian pilgrims. This poses a question whether the Israeli mentality can even organize a genuine Jewish pilgrimage, not to mention pilgrimages for other faiths.

Last but not least, the continual targeting of priests and vandalism of churches will always show that Israel is a country harboring and supporting terrorism. Many Israeli ministers use the same language and share the same ideology as terrorist gangs, like "price-tag" attacks. Also the Israeli authorities rarely, if ever, punish anyone engaged in price-tag attacks or other terrorists who continue to attack churches and monasteries. Such trends are on the rise with little or no media attention. This shows that Israel will never be a religious country. No religion or spiritual doctrine would support terrorism and hate. Their aim to become a "Jewish" country is both ironic and volatile considering that it totally excludes locals who hold Israeli passports but come from other faiths.

Last word

Some voices in the media believe that we cannot really change the situation here. This would make my film on spiritual tourism and many other films and efforts futile. However, with all respect, I think that such commenters are too

impatient to appreciate the real potential of incremental change. It is human nature to want everything finished quickly with as little effort as possible.

Another major problem is the lack of understanding of spiritual tourism and the role it plays in spiritual awakening for all faiths and spiritual doctrines. Because it goes beyond the physical realms of this world, one cannot understand or appreciate the potential of such experiences on the human soul and psyche without going through the experience oneself. Spirituality has changed me and many people I have come to know over the past few years in ways we could not have imagined possible. The effect of such a transformation is as wonderful and grand as magic itself.

The new spiritual identity that could spring out of a spiritual awakening could help us as Palestinians figure out how to present our culture both to ourselves and to those coming to the Holy Land seeking their own spiritual journeys. There is no single path, and, sadly, there is a lack of a spiritual rite of passage in our culture today to help direct the young generations, but there are still many ways forward. The least we can do is to keep all the options available and never scare seekers away from choosing their own paths up the mountain. It is those who label individual choices as "sins" that we should be really wary of.

The revival of our collective Palestinian spiritual identity is a hugely underrated aspect of our culture and its future options. It could provide innovative ways of dealing with certain inertias and hurdles that are blocking us from advancing into the twenty-first century with confident steps and with our culture intact. This is something that countries like China, Japan, and Malaysia were able to unlock in order to preserve their own cultures and spiritual values.

Pilgrims will only experience a spiritual journey when they experience it with the people who have merged their culture

and identity with this land for thousands of years. We already have the resources and potential to fully revive and keep this culture strong and original. The Israeli model does not offer that. It offers a completely opposite model that is shackled by the greed of institutions. Those institutions are only obsessed with the physical and materialistic needs of our world, and do not offer any sincere spiritual potential.

There have been some special Palestinian tours that invest in the spiritual side of pilgrimage. However, we are still at fault for advertising these tours as "alternative," which makes the tour sound like it is not genuine. Palestinian-led tours are offering *the* pilgrimage opportunity, the only one that can offer spiritual value. The majority of tours today are offered by Israeli tourism agencies, and this trend has become the norm. But that does not make them in any way the right choice for value and salvation.

"My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains.

They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place."

Old Testament - Jeremiah 50:6

Ahmad Damen is a Palestinian writer, composer, and filmmaker. He is a former content editor of This Week in Palestine. In addition to writing several articles and blogs, he has directed, researched, and composed music for two internationally successful feature documentaries: The Red Stone (2012) and Forbidden Pilgrimage (2014). A professional oud player, he takes a special interest in film scores and world music. Damen is currently in charge of the TV Unit at Birzeit University's Media Development Centre (MDC).

¹ <http://bit.ly/1zWpgvX>

² <http://stephensizer.com/articles/travel.html>