



AFSI SPRING 2023 CHIZUK MISSION IN REVIEW

By Judy Freedman Kadish, Director

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Every Chizuk Mission is special in its own way and this one was no exception. The energy and excitement as we started out was palpable. Old friends reconnecting and joking and including our new travelers in the conversation...getting them prepared for what lay ahead.

We had a Texas contingent with us this time, encouraged by our indefatigable Dallas Chapter Chair, Ann Stacy to try out the AFSI type of travel. We also were with a tour guide/Rabbi/martial arts expert who had great ideas and insights to share with us.

In keeping with our tradition of visiting the places in the news that are experiencing difficulty AND plunging right into our trip without any delay we initiated our newcomers by beginning the trip in Homesh - a newly regulated area we had tried numerous times to visit in the last few years. The walk up the hill which would take an IDF soldier 10 minutes was our first test. Everyone passed with flying colors, each according to his or her ability. There is a colorful description below of what we found there.

What is so important and so wonderful is that by some magic, this group like many before them, meshed together immediately. Everyone put in their absolute best effort to learn about the real Israel and to open their hearts to each other and to what they discovered about the REAL ISRAEL. Below is a day-by-day description of what our "AFSI FAMILY" experienced on our Spring Chizuk Mission.

DAY 1 – MONDAY, MAY 15

It's day one and we're off to a good start as everyone meets at Ben Gurion pretty much on schedule. Old friends reunite and great new friendships get underway. Onto the bus where we are greeted by our longtime dear friend and bus driver **Ami Dadon** who takes care of us like family and knows his way around the whole of Israel like very few. He also knows how to navigate some of the rougher and narrower roads we will encounter on our off the beaten track itinerary. We also get to meet our Licensed Tour Guide, **Rabbi Gary Alon Rogoff**, whose energy, passion for and knowledge of Israel and its Biblical history will add immensely to the trip. By the way, as it was his first AFSI Mission, we brought him to a few places he'd never been and introduced him to many of our old friends, which is not surprising if you know the AFSI Way.



Judy Kadish - Ready



Ami Dadon - Set



Rabbi Gary Alon Rogoff – Go!

Off to the Shomron, 1st stop **Homesh**, where after a “10



From the Army checkpoint to Homesh

minute” uphill walk, we visited with one of the local leaders and learned quite a bit about the community which was one of a handful in the Shomron that were evacuated along with Gush Katif in Gaza in 2005. It’s been just over the past few months that Jewish life has started to return to this mountain top town and right now it’s mostly makeshift

structures (which they see as a 5 Star Hotel) powered by a couple solar panels and inhabited by young Yeshiva students and IDF soldiers. It was only several days after our visit to Homesh that the US State Department and the EU condemned the construction of a new Yeshiva building and the community more generally. Since then, there have been reports of “Palestinians” marching towards the community and throwing stones and setting fires. Like so many others, this is a developing story with much of the media reporting in slanted if not flat-out erroneous ways. (By now they have moved down the hill to undisputed State lands. There they have a Beit Midrash and four dormitories, electricity and running water. Of course, they welcome any help you can give them in paying for all this!)

Next stop, the beautiful and historically significant mountain top community of Elon Moreh where G-d promised this land to Abraham. This is one of the more established



Kabir Winery

communities we visited, having been established in 1979 with currently 250 Jewish families or close to 2,000 people calling it home, the community is also the home of the awesome **Kabir Winery Restaurant** with the most fantastic views. At a big group table, we shared a delicious and memorable lunch, followed by a quick visit to the downstairs winery for a tasting of some of their international award-winning varietals.

Time for some more beautiful and biblically important vistas!

Up to Har Kabir overlooking Har

Grezim/Blessing and Har Eball/Curse, where Rabbi Alon spoke about his family coming to this spot on the first day of Aliyah in order to accept the covenant of coming to the land, just as the Jewish people did when they first came to the Holy Land. It is here where we learned about the Covenant of Zionism and Covenant of Excellence and the only two options of Blessing or Curse, full throttle or bust with nothing in between. It was a very meaningful and memorable stop on our journey!



In Homesh. Chizuk group with Rabbi Shmuel Wende



Enjoying tastings at Kabir Winery



Lunch in Elon Moreh



*In Har Kabir:
(L) Group chat
(R) Scenic view*



Next stop is a quick one. We will meet at the entrance to Elon Moreh with security expert **Yochai Provisor**, Security Projects Coordinator from the One Israel Fund along with a local community's chief security officer. During this briefing at the security checkpoint, we learned a good bit about how they work to maintain the safety and well-being of the community and over 500,000 Jewish residents of the Biblical Heartland of Judea and Samaria. Much of the security is on the ground but much of it is also based on technology including drones, cameras and much more. BTW, in case you were wondering, Yochai is the son of AFSI's dear friend Marc Provisor, and he was very informative and an absolute pleasure to meet.



Briefing with Yochai Provisor

Onward to our hotel for dinner and an overnight, we once again crisscross through the dump of an Arab town called Huwara (site of recent and continued terror attacks), where many beautiful Arab homes overlook the unavoidable main road that most resembles a junk yard as stealing cars and starting trouble with and attacking Jews are their top industries. Hopefully by the next time we're in the area the currently under construction bypass road will be complete.

After a quick check in at the Eshel HaShomron Hotel in Ariel, we had a few locally active organizer/influencer friends join us for dinner, wine, and discussion. Special thanks to **Yehuda HaCohen** who among other things is a leader in the Vision movement and to Tommy and Sherri Waller, founders, and president of HaYovel which since 2007 has hosted thousands of volunteers from over 30 different countries to help harvest, grow and green the vineyards and countryside of Judea & Samaria. It was a wonderful evening full of interesting dialogue and stories along with a healthy dose of fun and laughs.



Yehuda HaKohen speaks to our group

It's been a great opening day and tomorrow promises to be more of the same.

DAY 2 – TUESDAY, MAY 16



*Ariel shows the
model Tabernacle*

Following a nice if not quick early breakfast most of the group enjoyed a 30-minute tour and presentation of the Tabernacle model that is situated right behind the Eshel HaShomron Hotel. It was a surprisingly interesting and interactive experience led by a friendly and clever young hotel employee/Ariel University student who just so happened to be named **Ariel**.

Staying in the Shomron, our first three stops are classically meaningful and emotion evoking AFSI destinations to see dear friends in 3 different communities. Keep in mind that for some of our group it's a first visit and for several others, due to travel restrictions etc., it's their 1st visit in years to see our AFSI friends.

around and most importantly brings us to and shares the great meaning of their beautiful new Women's Mikveh dedicated in loving memory to Helen Freedman, z'l, as well as some other of their great friends and supporters.

*1st stop, Chavat Gilad where our loving host **Ilana Shimoni** surrounded by 2 of her 10 children greets us, shows us*



In Chavat Gilad with Ilana Shimoni



*With Akiva & Ayelet HaCohen
at the Helen Freedman Playroom*

*2nd stop, Yitzhar where we are greeted by more of our very dear friends, **Akiva and Ayelet HaCohen**. We talked about the long term AFSI connection and assistance provided to Yitzhar while seeing and learning a good bit about the growth of the community and Akiva's flourishing flour milling business. We also got to meet many of the children of Yitzhar and visit the **Helen Freedman Playroom** dedicated to her loving memory. I said it was an emotional morning.*



*Aerial view of the new Women's
Mikveh building in Chavat Gilad*



*Akiva HaCohen with
Charlie Bernhaut*

3rd stop, Itamar where we visited the beautiful home of our good friends, **Leah and Moshe Goldsmith**. After many loving greetings and some catching up, Leah gave us an excellent 30-minute briefing on what's going on in the community and region more generally. Then after a short drive up the mountain Moshe gave a great talk from a wonderful vantage point providing even more insight into the historic and biblical importance of the region.



*Below L: in Itamar Rabbi Moshe Goldsmith talks to us
(C - R) Remains in Ancient Shiloh*

At the home of Leah and Moshe Goldsmith



4th stop **Shiloh**, first a quick stop in the village of Shiloh for lunch, which was for most some pizza or some items from their small supermarket.

Next, a most interesting archeological tour, led by our guide Rabbi Alon, of Ancient Shiloh the first capital of Israel with many layers of history going back 3,000 years. Before we leave Shiloh, we have arranged for **ATV rides** and I'm not sure any of us knew what to expect but this was special. What we got was an action-packed hour where with 4 people per vehicle, we followed Boaz, our guide/leader, who at the halfway mark shared some excellent local insight with us, through the vineyards, farmland, and foothills of this picturesque, historically important and thriving Jewish region located in the heart of the Jewish Homeland.

Next, after what was an action-packed day, we head to Tel Aviv where we will spend the next 2 nights at the Brown Beach Hotel just a block off the remarkably vibrant beachfront but more on that later. For now, we need to get checked in and cleaned up quickly and get to our reservation at a lovely Kosher Tripolitan/Libyan restaurant named Guetta (all restaurants we go to as a group are certified Kosher). We're in the big city now, so once we all make our way,



Cruising in an ATV in Shiloh

we enjoy some uniquely delicious food and wine and hear from our special guest and friend Shai Rosengarten, National Student Coordinator from Im Tirtzu. Shai humbly shares his very impressive personal story as well as what's going on at Israel's universities and with the younger generation more broadly. Unfortunately, Israel's campuses are not immune from some of the same challenges presented here in the USA coming from the progressive left, and Shai and his organization are working tirelessly to help maintain safety and sanity.

It's been a great and full day, so while some of us walk along the beach back to the hotel, for most it's time for a good night's sleep before waking up in Tel Aviv for Day 3's 9:00am start. Laila Tov!!

DAY 3 – WEDNESDAY, MAY 17

Waking up to a highly active Tel Aviv morning, some of us did an early morning walk to and along the beautiful and vibrant



Tour at the IICC

beachfront. Then after a nice breakfast in our boutique hotel's café, we were boarding our bus shortly after 9:00am.

For this morning's visit to the **Israeli Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC)**, we are joined by long-time AFSI friend ADV. **Yifa Segal**, who has an impressive resume with government and NGOs, and will add so much information and insight to this visit in addition to valuable discussion about Israel's Judicial Reform initiative.



AFSI ❤️ Tel Aviv too!



Yifa Segal gives insight

The IICC, located in Ramat Hasharon several miles from downtown Tel Aviv, is a non-profit organization dedicated to commemorating the fallen from all branches of Israel's intelligence community and perpetuating the values and heritage of the community through educational programs. The first hour or so there were both informative and touching as we learned from our lovely, retired Mossad agent and IICC volunteer Alana about the 371 Israeli Intelligence Agents who perished while serving overseas since 1948. After this we had an interesting briefing and somewhat fiery discussion with Retired Brigadier General Shalom Harari from the Reichman University's "International Institute for Counterterrorism." From a defense strategy perspective, we learned quite a bit, while from a policy perspective we did not so much agree, a reminder of what happens in a "Democratic"

nation. Finally, before ending our visit and heading back to Tel Aviv, Yifa took the 'gavel' and led our group in discussion and reaction to what we had just heard in addition to much about Israel's current political landscape.



Sheffi Paz

Back in Tel Aviv where after a luscious lunch in the Neve Tsedek/Florentin area we headed to “South Tel Aviv,” which has been largely taken over by Sudanese and Eritrean Illegal immigrants. Unfortunately, although a fence has been erected to stop the flow, they dominate the area. We met with local activist **Sheffi Paz** to learn about the progress, or lack thereof in the neighborhood. While there are signs of gentrification, Sheffi assures us that the people in the newer buildings are not mixing with the locals and what was once a solid working-class neighborhood has been all but taken over by the often-violent infiltrators.

It is time to eat again, and our next stop is a local Shawarma & Falafel place in the Habima Square part of town, before heading to our last stop at the **Joseph Bau Museum**. Joseph

Bau was a Holocaust Survivor and artist who used the studio where we sat, and listened to his daughters’ stories, as a cover for his forgery activities on behalf of the Mossad. The daughters’ stories were so entirely fascinating, charming, and funny that most didn’t want the evening to end. But with another momentous day in the books, we say goodnight with much excitement for what’s in store for tomorrow!



Ken Abramowitz at the Joseph Bau Museum

BTW, at least one of us missed the last couple of activities today in lieu of a magical late afternoon in the Mediterranean and evening by the beautiful beaches and historic pubs of Tel Aviv!!

DAY 4 – THURSDAY, MAY 18

Waking up early to another beautiful Tel Aviv morning gives us all another chance to check out the beach and have a leisurely café breakfast, before we get back on the bus at 9:00 am to make our way to Jerusalem where we will be staying the next 3 nights.



The ride up to Jerusalem is always special but on this **Yom Yerushalayim morning with flags** flying it was that much more exciting! First stop was the Old City and the Kotel for a fascinating tour of the tunnels and archaeological findings up to three levels below the Har HaBayit that show the thousands of years of Jewish history from the times of the 1st and 2nd Temples and beyond.

Israeli blue and white is everywhere!

From the Kotel, with the leadership of our tour guide, Rabbi Rogoff who has been trained by and is



Inside synagogue in the Kotel tunnel

involved with Ateret Cohanim, we walked north into the “Muslim Quarter” of the Old City. This is always interesting as it is genuinely like walking through time and with this being Yom Yerushalayim, there was a special electricity in the air. Our destination in the Muslim Quarter was a Jewish



Touring inside the Kotel tunnel

Residence (thanks to the efforts of Ateret Cohanim), where on the rooftop there are arguably the best views available of the Old City and Jerusalem. For us, this visit is made even more special as it's where AFSI's beloved longtime leader, Helen Freedman z'l, with special connections to so many, is honored for her tireless devotion to the land and people of Israel and Jerusalem. Before leaving the residence, which is sort of a four flat, we visit with the lovely Ema of the young family who lives on the top floor and learn a bit about them before the father and couple of the children return home from a little shopping trip to share with us some ice pops and boy, they were good. An incredibly special visit indeed!

Next, we walked back through the Old City toward the Jaffa Gate and in the direction of our hotel on King David Street, but first a really nice outdoor lunch at one of the many great spots that make up the Mamilla Mall. The food was great, and the energy was ramping up as the Yom Yerushalayim celebration was getting ready to kick into gear. Time for a free late afternoon to get ourselves checked into the recently beautifully renovated and rebranded Cassia Hotel (formerly the King Solomon hotel) on King David Street where our luggage awaits. With plenty of time to walk the streets of the city, join in the Parade and celebrate, get some rest or whatever one wanted to do. For dinner tonight we are on our own, and tomorrow is going to be another big day!!



Atop the House with the View overlooking Jerusalem and Har HaBayit



Judy, Charlie, Ken by the plaque in memory of Helen Freedman, z'l

DAY 5 – FRIDAY, MAY 19



Rabbi Rogoff and Ken Freedman proudly wave flags

It is Friday morning, and we are waking up early in Jerusalem to get started with what will prove to be an incredibly special day! For many of us, with the encouragement of Rabbi Alon, the day starts with a very festive 7:30am Shacharit



The Tayalet

service at the Tayalet overlooking Jerusalem and the Old City. Between the songs, prayer, views, dancing, fellowship, and shared messages this was truly an amazing way to start the day. While there we also had the honor and pleasure of bumping into and chatting with a number of good friends including Jerusalem's Deputy Mayor Arie King and Ateret Cohanim's Executive Director Daniel Luria.

By 9:30am or so, we are on the bus and off to Gush Etzion's G'vaot Village and home to **Sadnat-Shiluv**, their school for



At Sadnat Shiluv in G'vaot Village

children and young adults with a wide range of special needs. We met with **Sefi Appel**, the Project Developer and Manager of the Special Education Village, who gave us a great briefing on what is going on throughout this wonderful community. After the briefing, we had the chance to walk the grounds, see the animal center, say hello to some of the residents and see some of them at work and at play in the village. It was also great to say hello to a busload of high school girls who were there to learn about and work with the people and families that make up the community. Another extraordinary visit!



Sefi Appel

Next stop, the Oz v'Gaon Nature Preserve and Zionist Educational & Cultural Center. It's here, overlooking the Gush Etzion Junction, that we'll meet with our very special friends **Yehudit Katsover and Nadia Matar**, leaders of the Sovereignty Movement.



With Yehudit Katsover and Nadia Matar

They are also the driving force behind the establishment of Oz v'Gaon as a Zionist response to the murder of the three youths, Eyal, Gilad and Naftali, hy"d, who were murdered by Arab terrorists on July 1, 2014. We received a great briefing on how the park came to be, what's going on in the region today and near-term plans for the Sovereignty Movement which included their June 8 Sovereignty Youth Conference with the focus on Sovereignty over the Jordan Valley First as a first and consensual step on the way to Sovereignty over the entire Land of Israel (which came off very well with approximately 1,000 young people participating).

Finally, before moving on, we all walked over to view and spend some time in the recently constructed **Helen Freedman Compound**.

This magnificent hand built from the ground up 'Pergola,' which could easily hold a tennis court or a couple Pickleball courts, was made with overwhelming love to honor Helen, her passion for Zion and her work with AFSI as amongst other things "she brought more



Helen Freedman Compound Dedication Plaque

than 50 groups from America to Israel to give Chizuk to the brave pioneers of Judea and Samaria." It was a special visit to a special place with extraordinary people at the helm and we say goodbye looking forward to helping to provide continued support and our next visit.



Chizuk group at the Compound's Pergola



In front of the Pergola at the Compound



At Ma'arat HaMachpelah in Hebron

Next, not to miss a meal, it is time for some nourishment and maybe a little shopping, as we stop at a local shopping center with some great kosher choices and a handful of nice shops.

Back on the bus and headed for Hebron and the **Ma'arat HaMachpelah** or Cave of the Patriarchs, but before we roll, we have an impromptu visit and briefing from Yishai Fleisher, our friend and

amongst other things the International Spokesman for the Jewish Community of Hebron on what is going on in Hebron today. Although it is already Friday afternoon and we need to get moving, we are happy we got to see him and know we will spend more time with him in the coming days. On to Hebron, where again led by Rabbi Alon, we not only walk the holy grounds, but we also get an intimate look into the spiritual significance of the Cave of the Patriarchs and the four prestigious couples buried there including Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah.

On the move again and on our way back to Jerusalem where the whole group along with a couple of dinner guests will enjoy a wonderful and plentiful Shabbat dinner. Shabbat Shalom!!

DAY 6 – SATURDAY/SHABBAT, MAY 20

It is a beautiful Jerusalem morning and in the spirit of the Sabbath we have a light schedule. While many of the group start their day with Shabbat services at one of the several local synagogues including Jerusalem's Great Synagogue, others of us got out early to walk the streets, parks and alleys of Jerusalem and the Old City. And we all enjoyed a nice leisurely and wonderful hotel breakfast along the way. Several people in the group also used the later morning hours to get in some poolside rest and relaxation before it is time for lunch.

For today's full group Shabbat lunch, we all sit around what has become our regular table in the garden section of the hotel's dining room. In a leisurely fashion, along with a few lunch guests, we enjoy many delicious foods and wines with a good bit of light and easy conversation. Some more serious talks and discussion will happen after the meal.



Col (ret.) David Hacham

After lunch we moved to one of the hotel's private meeting rooms where we had the great opportunity and privilege to hear from a couple of our guests. First and foremost was **Colonel (ret.) David Hacham** who served for 30 years in various intelligence and political-strategic positions in the IDF and following his military career was appointed advisor for Arab Affairs to seven different Ministers of Defense. David, who is an old friend of AFSI's, has so much information to share that we cannot do it justice here, but it was an extremely interesting and informative session with some great Q&A. David has written a couple of very important books, continues to actively blog on his area of expertise

and can be followed on The MirYam Institute website.

Following David, we had the pleasure of hearing from **Byron Stinson** from Jerusalem by way of Texas. Byron, who we will be spending more time within the coming days, gives us a briefing on the fascinating work that he and his wife Tammy, as strong Judeo-Christian believers work with their organization Boneh Israel, as defined by its name is to build up and restore Israel. They are making extreme efforts to help in the process of the building of a Third Jewish Temple and recently came to the



Byron Stinson

public eye for finding and delivering to Israel in tandem with The Temple Institute the several impeccably Red Heifers that are now residing in a secret location in Israel, but more on that later.

Next after some afternoon rest time, some of the group heads back to the Old City for a Seudah Shlishit or the third meal of Shabbat at a private home. For dinner tonight we are once again on our own, so after sundown at least for some of us, this means some of the most delicious pizza and salad that you can imagine at the Bardak Pizza Bar directly across the street from the hotel.

Good night and Shavua Tov!

DAY 7 – SUNDAY, MAY 21

It is going to be another busy and special day as we start the new week! Still in Jerusalem, we make an early move to the Temple Mount, the holiest place in Judaism. On the way through security and up the rickety Mughrabi Bridge, the sole entry point for Jews and tourists to the Temple Mount, we



At the Temple Mount L - R: Glenn Richter; Group photo

see big crowds praying and celebrating (including several Bar Mitzvahs) at the Kotel where Jews are allowed to pray. We believe it was an extra busy day as aside from being just a couple of days after Yom Yerushalayim, it was also Rosh Chodesh Sivan. Once up on Har HaBayit we enjoy a special stroll around the grounds led by our own **Glenn Richter**. No place else will you find so much history, evidence, and controversy. No matter how many times you have been there, this is a must visit when in Jerusalem. We can recommend many guides, but the Beyadenu organization is a stand-out.

After a quick farewell to Jerusalem breakfast, we check out of our hotel and for the first time in a few days are back on the bus, this time heading south. As we approach the Negev the terrain changes are extraordinary to say the least. Our first stop is **Sde Boker** and the absolute beauty and wildlife of the Ben Gurion National Park and his Desert Home. As Israel's first and multi term Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion saw Sde Boker as a "pioneering enterprise" which fulfilled his Zionist vision to settle the Negev and "make the desert bloom". While he was back and forth during his years as PM, following his final resignation in 1963 he and his wife Paula retired here where the home remains as it was in 1973, is open to the public and serves as a most interesting timepiece. A great stop!

Below L – R: In Sde Boker; A curious Ibex; Magnificence of Mitzpe Ramon-Edge of Makhtesh Ramon



Back on the bus we are heading further south into the Negev and the town of **Mitzpe Ramon** which sits on the edge of the **Makhtesh Ramon**, the



At Makhtesh Ramon overlooking the Ramon Crater

world's largest erosional crater. Here from the edge of what is often referred to as Israel's Grand Canyon, we not only get some extraordinary views we also get a bit of a geology,



Stargazing the sky in Mitzpe Ramon

zoology and botany lesson from our Sensei, Rabbi Rogoff. From the rim, we get back on the bus and go down some 3,000 feet to the floor of the canyon where we get to sample the hiking and climbing that makes Makhtesh Ramon the great destination for nature-lovers and adventure-seekers. Time to check into our hotel in the surprising village of Mitzpe Ramon and clean up for a well-deserved and

delicious dinner. While convening in the hotel lobby area before the meal, some of us have the special experience of encountering some of the area's wildlife as we are paid a visit just outside in the hotel's garden. I know we have not emphasized the food so much in the report, but I can assure you that the choices and quality of the food here, like so many of our prior meals, was extraordinary and after such a big day was most enjoyable.

After dinner when it got good and dark, we walked about a half mile through and to the west edge of town, to add to our day of science. This time we did a little astronomy through a Stargazing session with a local expert. The area, known for its dark skies and lack of "light pollution," is known as an ideal place to relax and take a journey across the night sky. Despite the high-powered telescopes and expertise of our local expert, we could not all see what we were trying to, we learned a lot, got in a few naps, and had a bunch of laughs. Another great and memorable day in the books!

DAY 8 – MONDAY, MAY 22



Rabbi Rogoff and Corey Ingram

After another delicious breakfast including some awesome cappuccino at the Ramon Inn Hotel, we get going on what for some of the group will be our final day of this mission.

First stop is just down the street in Mitzpe Ramon at the **Yeshivat Midbara K'Eden**. In our brief time in town, Rabbi Alon has davened here a couple times and become friends with several of the leaders and students. So, as we can, due to the limited size of our group, in an impromptu fashion we stop in to visit, learn about and meet a number of these new friends. The Yeshiva is a recognized Hesder Yeshiva which means that its roughly 400 students serve in the Israel Defense Forces while

still engaging in Torah study. It was a nice and inspiring way to start our day and many of us had the great pleasure of meeting with the young men who make this place the energized and growing institution that it is.

Next stop before we hit the highway is the **Ilan Ramon Museum and Memorial** on the edge of the 'crater' at the Makhtesh Ramon visitor center. It's dedicated to the memory of Israel's first astronaut, who tragically died in the 2003 Space Shuttle Columbia disaster when the shuttle disintegrated upon re-entering the Earth's atmosphere. The exhibition provides an intimate glimpse into his life, family and amazing if not tragic story. Overlooking the uniquely lunar-like landscape of the Ramon Crater, this is a most fitting setting for this memorial as Ilan Ramon not only trained in the area, but he also changed his name earlier in life thanks to his love for this part of Israel's Negev Desert.



Ilan Ramon and Columbia Space Shuttle crew

Back on the bus and headed northwest to our next destination, our beloved city of Sderot which sits in the northern Negev less than seven hundred yards from the Gaza Strip. Our first stop is at Emunah Sderot, where we learn about the organization, the new facility and the nature of their work providing therapeutic services (think PTSD) to Israel's most vulnerable citizens; one child and one family at a time.



Sderot Overlook to Gaza



Mayor Alon Davidi remembers Helen Freedman, z'l, with Charlie

special friends who are core to the heart and soul of Sderot, **Mayor Alon Davidi** and Dorel Abramovitz, Sderot's Director of Development. Here we will spend the next 90 minutes or so in a conference room, enjoying some delicious fruit platters while learning what it is like to be under

Next stop is the newly constructed **Overlook** from where we can clearly see the border fence with and into Gaza. As visitors it was quite surreal that, aside from the eighteen or so years of rockets being launched into Sderot and other parts of Israel from Gaza, it was less than two weeks earlier that the region was under attack with over 1,200 rockets being fired on it by the terrorists just to the west.



Ken Freedman, Mayor Alon Davidi, Charlie Bernhaut

Now that we've been reminded exactly how close we were to the border, it was time for us to meet with our very dear and



In Sderot with Mayor Alon Davidi

consistent if not somewhat sporadic siege and the challenges including PTSD suffered by the children and the residents as a whole. Through it all we also learned about all the good in the way of community spirit, support and positive attributes that continue to make the city of 35,000 an attractive and resilient place to live that continues to grow at a surprisingly high rate. At the close of the meeting there are some special moments shared between our group and our great friends as we bid them farewell. *Am Yisrael and Am Sderot Chai!!*

Then we're back on the road to Gush Etzion where we will enjoy our official Chizuk Mission



celebratory farewell dinner and will say goodbye for now to many of the AFSI faithful. Here we not only enjoyed some great food and wine, (Israel has become a leader in both), but we each had the opportunity to give thanks and share our thoughts, highlights, and most meaningful memories of the eight extraordinary days we just spent together. The combination of emotions and laughs is something we will all remember as we look forward to future missions!

So, as we bid farewell to those headed off to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, or Ben Gurion airport, about half the group heads to the nearby community of Kfar Etzion where we will spend the night in their guest cabins and get ready for some more adventure tomorrow.

Farewell dinner in Gush Etzion

DAY 9 – TUESDAY, MAY 23



Post breakfast photo opp with Elie Mischel and Malkah & Yishai Fleisher

Waking up to a beautiful Gush Etzion day, it was a true delight to enjoy our morning coffee in the backyards of the Kfar Etzion guest cottages with its beautiful views of the Judean Hills.



At beautiful Arugot Farm

On to the Kfar Etzion dining hall where we get a sense for what goes on here on a typical Tuesday morning with so many young people enthusiastically getting their day underway. For breakfast we are joined by our friends **Elie Mischel** of HaMizrachi Magazine and Israel365 as well as **Yishai and Malkah Fleisher** whose collective resumes are

almost too extensive to give proper credit to here, but in short it includes Malkah as social media and content strategy professional at Jerusalem University and Yishai as a pro-Israel activist, podcast host, and International Spokesperson for the Jewish community of Hebron. A great start to the day with a ton of thoughtful and interesting dialogue



Jeremy Gimpel by the Ecological Pool

Next, we join Ami on our newer and smaller bus as we head off to visit more of our dear friends, frontiersmen and true lovers of Israel, **Jeremy Gimpel** and Ari Abramowitz. Arriving at their **Arugot Farm**, we are amazed each time to see the progress they have made despite much of the world being at least partially at a standstill. The plan here is to create a working organic farm and spiritual retreat center with the hope of turning the site into a global tourist destination, while protecting and keeping this biblically historic and important



Mike Isley with an adorable goat

land under Jewish control. Having seen how far they have come; we are highly confident in their success and strongly recommend putting Arugot Farm on your list of must visits in the Israeli heartland. As for our time there, some of the key highlights included another delicious and exotic fruit platter sent for us by Yehuda Glick who we were hoping to see, a great walk around the grounds including a look at the fantastic vistas and the extraordinary **ecological pool**, a good twenty minute session in their Beit Tefillah full of discussion and song led by Jeremy on his guitar, a bit of green juice and discussion in Ari's home and finally a little play time



Ami @ Kever Yishai and Ruth

with some of the young ones in their flock of sheep. Another great visit and hopefully next time we are there the 18-suite guest house will be complete so we can spend a night or two.

Next as far as we know we're heading down to the Dead Sea for a little pampering and R&R but way before we get there, we find ourselves back in a neighborhood of Hebron where Ami has a surprise for us. After parking and getting our bearings, we find our way to the newly refurbished **Kever Yishai and Ruth**, as they are busy finishing things up for the upcoming Shavuot holiday when it is tradition to read the Book of Ruth and host the many that follow the custom of ascending to the Tomb of Ruth and Jesse for this purpose. It

was a great impromptu stop!

Back on the bus for the extraordinarily beautiful ride Down to the Dead Sea! It had been a while, at least for some of us since being there if not the first time. The impression this writer had was that of a smaller and booming Las Vegas style oasis town, minus the gambling.



Some R&R floating in the Dead Sea

After checking into the Isrotel Nevo Hotel, we all went down to the sea for a float, where we realized just how difficult it was not to float. We had a bunch of laughs and some of us hit the hotel pool and spa area on the way back from the beach before cleaning up for the evening. For dinner tonight we will eat in the hotel's delicious steakhouse and enjoy some time listening to a little Motown style music from a duet (from Dimona) in the hotel lounge area. It was another full day with the Texas contingent of the mission and with a couple more to go it's time for some sleep.

DAY 10 – WEDNESDAY, MAY 24

Waking up to a beautiful Dead Sea morning, after enough time for a sunrise walk, an early morning dip and a sumptuous Israel hotel breakfast we are back on the road heading north along the Jordan Valley towards the Golan Heights.



Janice & William Curry

After a quick stop at a scenic overlook over the north end of the Dead Sea for some fun picture time, our first stop is Gilgal where we reconvene with Byron and Tammy Stinson along with their son Isaac. Byron is going to be our guide today and first we head to Biblical Gilgal where Byron explains how it is here at the west bank of the Jordan River where we

learn about the layers of time separating biblical events at this location and how it would have been much easier for the Children of Israel to enter the land by coming straight north to Hebron but Moses was instructed by G-d to come to this exact spot.



*L-R: Judy Kadish, Ann Stacy
Janice Curry, Kristi Ingram*



*Mike Isley, Byron Stinson, Ann Stacy
Red Heifers in the background*

From Gilgal, we traveled north to a secure location where the **Red Heifers** from Texas were then being domiciled. The heifers, which Byron, and his organization Boneh Israel played a crucial role in locating and shipping to Israel, are being cared for

in the hopes that they will remain pure and used in the law of Numbers 19.



Para Adumah – Red Heifer



Lunch at Pagoda restaurant

From there we headed up to Tiberias where we had a truly scrumptious family style Kosher Chinese lunch at the **Pagoda restaurant**, an old AFSI favorite, overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

After lunch we worked our way to the ancient city of **Korazim**. This location, which is now part of the wonderful Israel Nature and Parks Authority, has one of the best-preserved Synagogues in existence and we were able to walk the grounds and spend some time discussing the history and significance of that history.



L & R: Korazim

Next in this extremely busy day, we make it to the small Golan Heights community of Had Ness and our beautiful “home” for the night where we are being hosted in a most wonderful manner by homeowner and friend Alon Barack. After settling in and having the opportunity to get better acquainted with Alon, the group headed to a Texas style Dude ranch called **Vered Hagalil**, in the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee for a very elegant evening meal. Back at the house, after dinner there was opportunity for some rooftop stargazing for those of us with any energy left. It was a momentous day!



Above L & R at Vered Hagalil: Student on horseback; bar inside the restaurant

DAY 11 – THURSDAY, MAY 25



L & R In the Golan Heights: Early morning view and breakfast



Waking up at our Golan Heights home for the night, today will be the final day of the AFSI Spring '23 Chizuk Mission extension and for most of the group it will be this evening that they will be heading back, or in retrospect expecting to be heading back to the USA. But before we get on going, we are treated to a delicious heart healthy breakfast prepared for the group by our host and one of his dear and lovely neighbors. After breakfast and some fond farewells, Byron, and his family head back home to

Jerusalem and the rest of us get back on the bus.



William Curry (L) listens to Yaakov Selevan (R)

First stop, **Tel Saki** where we will meet with another AFSI friend, **Major (Res.) Yaakov Selevan**, Founder and Program Director of Slingshot. The hills and bunkers of Tel Saki are a fitting memorial to the courage and heroism of the IDF turned a close defeat into a resounding victory in the Six-Day War and where a little more than six years later in the Yom Kippur War a bitter, brutal, and miraculous battle was won by Israel against Syrian forces trying to overtake the Golan Heights. It was an excellent lesson and experience as we not only

learned so much about the history and current situation here near Israel's borders with Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, we also got to go underground with Yaakov in the young 1973 fighters' footsteps and got a sense for the unexpected challenges they experienced awaiting amidst fear and darkness. After we make our way back into the light, we have a little time for more personal and current day chat with Yaakov before wishing him a Chag Shavout Tov and making our way to our next stop.

Corey Ingram meets the light at the end of Tel Saki tunnel



Tel Saki Bunker



This will be our last visit up in the Golan before we start making our way back to the Tel Aviv area. We arrive at the home of a dear friend of our Texas contingent, **Adam Eliyahu Berkowitz**, where we will enjoy a genuinely nice homemade lunch made by our Rabbi, Writer, and Chef host. While all sitting around the table, we hear his life story and what he and his family are up to these days, and we share things about ourselves and the wonderful eleven days we have all just spent together. Adam who is an ordained Orthodox rabbi, has authored several books and is Features Writer at Israel365 where his main area of expertise is Israel and Jewish-Christian relations. After lunch and buying up a good bit of his book inventory we wished him and his wife a fond farewell and Shavuot Tov before heading south in time for the holiday.



Lunch at the home of Rabbi Adam Eliyahu Berkowitz

Next, due to the holiday, we did some quick rerouting and the group got to spend a few more hours together in Ramat Gan before most of the group heads to Ben Gurion with the hopes of an easy trip home, but that's another story.

And that is a wrap, we hope you enjoyed the report, and we look forward to seeing this missions' participants as well as many of you AFSI Chizuk faithful and many more who might be inspired to come along on future missions!

#AFSI #AmYisraelChai
#AmericansForASafeIsrael

AND THAT'S A WRAP - L'HITRAOT!

Please be on the lookout for the announcement of our next fabulous Chizuk Mission, tentatively scheduled for October 2023. All are welcome to come and experience the exciting, fascinating, and inspiring Israel with us! As for Chizuk (strength), you'll get back as much as you give!

