



Dineh elder Pat McCabe leading the group in a water blessing to open the ceremony at Megiddo/Armageddon. Photograph by Daryl Henderson

Gifts in the Promised Land: A pilgrimage of spirit, song, and friendship

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IT IS THE PLACE WHERE, according to biblical tradition, the final battle between good and evil will be waged. The very name—Armageddon—evokes images of desolation, death, a broken landscape, and terrified people.

Yet when our international delegation of ninety-two spiritual leaders, musicians, and dignitaries gathered on that rocky hilltop known today as Megiddo, Israel, the fronds of palm trees swayed gently in the breeze, three falcons powered through a clear blue sky, and a butterfly leisurely investigated Native American ceremonial items laid out on a blanket. Chief Phil Lane, Chickasaw-Dakota, blew on an eagle bone whistle, and those piercing notes launched an event the likes of which, according to one staff member at that historic site, had never before occurred there—a ceremony devoted to peace.

The event at Megiddo was the culmination of a pilgrimage, Holy Land / Living Water, winding through Jordan, Palestine, and Israel in early February 2020 during World Interfaith Harmony Week. Co-sponsored by UNITY EARTH, EcoPeace Middle East, and United Religions Initiative (URI), the journey was part of UNITY EARTH's series of worldwide events aimed at cultivating ecological and spiritual harmony among diverse populations. Our group itself modeled congenial diversity. It included male and female rabbis; academics; an Ethiopian prince; a Sufi lineage holder from India; a popular Islamic leader known as the "Green Sheik"; three Buddhist monks from Thailand; indigenous spiritual leaders from Ecuador, Mexico, Australia, the United States, and Canada; social entrepreneurs; the chair of the Parliament of the World's Religions; two ambassadors; interfaith ministers; a priest who develops environmental policy at the Vatican; as well as musicians, ecologists, diplomats, and peace activists.

The geophysical and metaphysical current that ran throughout the trip was the Lower Jordan River, vitally important to the three Abrahamic religions of the area, and the bodies of water out of which the river flows and into which it empties, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Moses gazed across the Jordan at the Promised Land, Christ was baptized in its waters by John the Baptist, and several of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad are entombed along its banks. Diversion and unequal distribution of water and the dumping of waste have shrunk and poisoned the river, so that

in places it is more like a slurry of raw sewage than a great river. Recognizing that environmental solutions cannot be achieved without the contribution of faith leaders, EcoPeace forms partnerships with community leaders on both sides of the Jordan in order to clean up the river. Local success stories can then leverage national policy, such as a covenant, signed in 2013 by leaders and clerics of the three monotheistic religions, to cooperate on behalf of the river. The covenant is a living document that continues to collect signatures, as it did at a conference we attended at the Dead Sea on the first full day of the trip.

Throughout the week, we not only immersed ourselves in the environmental realities and spiritual values of the region by visiting sacred places, learning about ecological challenges and achievements, and meeting with local activists and community leaders; we also seeded our various stops with prayer, ceremony, song, and discussions about how these ancient and holy places inform our lives today. At Mount Nebo, for example, we stood on the mountain summit where Moses beheld the Promised Land that God allowed him to see but forbid him from entering with his people. It seemed significant that a light fog pillowed the valley that morning, so that, unlike Moses, we could not see the land on the other side of the river, but had every expectation of setting foot upon it the following day. Faith leaders of different traditions offered prayers, and Reverend Sylvia Sumter read the chilling words of Martin Luther King in 1968, the night before he was assassinated: "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there

with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." Afterwards, several of us shared our personal visions of what a new Promised Land might look like: a revitalized Jordan River with willows waving once again on its banks; green spaces where Jewish, Muslim, and Christian children can play together; Jerusalem as a holy city welcome to all; a planet where all living beings and all places are protected and cared for.

Faith leaders offered baptismal blessings on the banks of the Jordan, and at Jerusalem Archeological Park, site of the most ancient building blocks of Temple Mount, Rev. Deborah Moldow and singer Kristin Hoffmann led a ceremony in which everyone chanted the names of the Divine Feminine—"Maria, Sophia, Shekhinah"—as we envisioned entering the Promised Land through the prophesied "Golden Gate" of Jerusalem, opening to a new era of peace for people of all faiths. We walked among the beautiful tiered gardens at the Bahá'í Center, a UNESCO World Heritage Site; circumambulated the tomb of Abu Obeida, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad; and joined worshippers at the Western Wall on a cold, moonlit night in Jerusalem. At the tiny Ethiopian Orthodox chapel at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Ambassador Mussie Hailu and Prince Ermias Sahle Selassie, whose grandfather, Haile Selassie, led the Ethiopian Church to independence from the Coptic Church, joined Fumi Johns Stewart, executive director at the World Peace Prayer Society and The Peace Pole Project, to present a peace pole to leaders of that small but

enduring congregation.

We even made offerings at the Jordanian-Palestinian border, a desolate, littered place with a history of violence, fear, and desperation. During the long wait for visas, UNITY EARTH musicians Pato Banton and Antoinette Roosdawtah led some members of the group in making a music video, while others crafted a small bird out of stones, a catalpa pod, and sticks as a gift of beauty for that wounded borderland. Because our group tended to respond to each visit as an opportunity for spirited expression, we were often delayed in getting from one place to another. Our hosts at a Druze community in Isfiya, Israel; at Beit Ha'Gefen, the Arab-Jewish Center in Haifa; the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; the Bahá'í Center; and at places of worship and historic sites never showed anything but kindness. They greeted us with snacks of sweets, dates, and tea, and hosts and guests quickly consolidated in small groups for conversation and photographs. "The Holy Land / Living Water journey was a momentous series of events celebrating intercultural unity across many diverse groups," said Ben Bowler, founder and executive director of UNITY EARTH, as "all gathered together to honor the water and the Earth itself."

There were a few occasions when the exuberant energy of the group was not appreciated. At the Mount of Temptation a stern Greek Orthodox monk quashed an impromptu ceremony. Leaving for flights home at Tel Aviv airport, several people of color were subjected to exhaustive searches, and one

progressive rabbi was detained for two days on bogus charges. Yet even the obstacles provided opportunities to model compassion. At the resplendent Dome of the Rock, said to be the site where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac and where the Prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven, local tensions were high, especially because, just days earlier, President Trump had sanctioned Israel's further annexation of Palestinian territory. The diverse religious garb of some members of the group caused the first stirrings of unease. We were warned to refrain from displays of prayer, laughter, or affection. But it was when Ghanaian musician Rocky Dawuni reached out to touch an outer wall of the building that guards moved in and we were hastily ushered out of the courtyard. "I was calm," Dawuni reflected later. "I thought about how Muslim worshippers have to be searched by armed security guards every time they want to go to the mosque and pray. It's easy to understand why they feel protective of their space."

Any pilgrimage coheres and evolves largely because of what happens between scheduled stops at important sites, and simply unfolds over meals, on buses, and during walks from one place to another. This trip offered abundant such opportunities. On the first day of the journey, identifiable markers of faith vanished as several people donned swimsuits in order to bob around together in the buoyant waves of the Dead Sea. An eleven-year-old Muslim girl from United Arab Emirates, tapped by her father to be a carrier of her lineage, received a ceremony from indigenous leaders in which she claimed, with maturity and

grace, this responsibility most unusual for someone of her age and gender. A young American man, who as a child had been baffled by his minister father's devotion to Christianity, was deeply moved as he stood by the waters of the River Jordan and grasped that "purity of faith" that had been such an intrinsic part of his upbringing. In the narrow, meandering market area of Jerusalem's Old Town a man of Aboriginal Australian descent narrated to three admiring Hasidic shopkeepers the story of his ancestry, as depicted in paintings on his kangaroo-skin robe. As the bus rumbled past fertile green valleys, faded villages, and the walled outskirts of the holy city of Jerusalem, conversations between individuals frequently fanned out into group singing accompanied by guitars, clapping hands, and percussion by acclaimed tabla drummer and URI leader Biswadeb Chakraborty wielding an empty Pringles can. As the group gradually dispersed on the last day, a few of us gathered for several hours in the food court of the Tel Aviv airport to share what the trip had meant to us and delve into the kinds of fascinating, unanswerable questions that have engaged spiritual seekers for hundreds of years.

The Holy Land holds meaning even for those who do not practice an Abrahamic religion. One place whose name is widely known is Armageddon, symbol of the final battle on Earth. A ceremony planned to occur there on the last full day of the trip had long been in process, and new details were introduced as late as the night before, when women elders of various nations received a pinch of tobacco from Chief Phil Lane, along with a request to offer a prayer during

the ceremony. The next morning, after the chief had called in the Four Directions, Dineh (Navajo) elder "Auntie" Pat McCabe led a blessing with waters that people had brought from their homelands. Indigenous leaders from Australia, Ecuador, and Mexico made prayers from their own traditions, and every member of the group called out one word expressing a quality they would offer to this place and occasion. Nineteen-year-old Jeevan Kress-Jones of Germany read a document expressing his intention to be a force of peace after a long lineage of men who had fought and killed in wars. "We, the members of the human family, commit to waging peace," he proclaimed. All week this young man had been quiet and reserved. Now his voice rang out with such passion and confidence it was as if he addressed the forces of aggression and compassion in every heart as well as every nation. Ben Bowler remarked later, "The ceremony at Megiddo was a declaration that the armies of light have defeated the destructive forces of evil. While the work is truly now just beginning, it is also true that none of us shall ever be the same again."

The question must be asked: Is it possible that one racially and spiritually diverse group, ebullient and unabashedly compatible, might really have made a difference in an area that has undergone deep-seated strife for such a long time? It is, of course, too early to tell. Some people have already been in touch with the EcoPeace team about possible collaborations. A few plan to return to the Holy Land to advance partnerships forged on the trip. For many the whole experience was confirmation that kindness,

compassion, forgiveness, and generosity really are what matter in the world. The enlightened humans whose footsteps covered that land along the Jordan River, and those of other spiritual traditions besides, have been saying so for millennia. One sign that the spirit of this group was contagious came after the ceremony at Megiddo. As the UNITY EARTH musicians led the way down the mountain with guitars and song, we passed several tour groups waiting to make the long trek to the summit. Many people among them joined in with smiles and waves. ♦