

Sha'ar Zahav Israel Trip 2024 Congregational Information May 30, 2024

Background

In early October 2023, a group of Sha'ar Zahav members and friends was set to travel to Israel on an 8 day tour. It was the first official synagogue trip to Israel planned since 2006. Entitled "Israel from Many Angles: A Sha'ar Zahav Travel Experience," our trip had 20 confirmed travelers including Rabbi Copeland. After the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, amidst our sense of horror, loss and grief, we quickly realized that this trip could not happen. The trip was canceled indefinitely.

We are living through a time of great heartache and uncertainty about the October 7th attack, the continuing holding of hostages, the ongoing war in Gaza, the loss of human life, and hostilities in the North and in the West Bank.

In recent months many congregations and other organizations have resumed travel to Israel. It's important for Sha'ar Zahav to go behind and beyond the headlines and podcasts to learn, bear witness and provide solidarity. After some discussion, the Va'ad (Board) approved moving forward with registration for a revised SZ trip, supporting the trip with a vote of 11-3. We hope to travel with a group of Sha'ar Zahav members and friends - including from sibling synagogues - who represent a wide range of viewpoints.

In partnership with MEJDI ("Socially Conscious Travel across the Globe"), pioneers in dual-narrative tours and our tour operator, we have determined it is now reasonable to re-schedule our trip, with the understanding that circumstances can change. Our new travel dates are **Nov. 15 – Nov. 24, 2024.**

If we want the chance to go in 2024, we must plan now because travel reservations, itinerary and logistics must be arranged well in advance of a group trip.

Our trip will be grounded in a multi-perspective approach to learning about Israel and the prospects and proposals for peace, co-existence, and security. We have now adapted the itinerary, to include - among other things - a half-day of volunteering, and visits to October 7 memorials. We will visit sites and meet with representatives from various organizations in the following regions: Tel Aviv, Yaffo, Ramla or Lod, Tzfat, Jordan Valley, Jerusalem,

Bethlehem or Gush Etzion (This includes sites in Palestine, or the West Bank.) See the trip website (link below) for specific itinerary.

While accepting the existing uncertainty, we want to position ourselves for a trip of learning about and connecting with Israel and Israelis - Jewish and Palestinian: to learn from many perspectives, to meet with peace builders, and the LGBTQ community - including queer Palestinian organizations, and a new Trans Center in Tel Aviv.

Purpose Statement

The bullet points below are the multi-faceted goals of our trip to Israel, *Israel from Many Angles: A Sha'ar Zahav Travel Experience*. Some are new, and many are retained from our original (2023) purpose statement. Please note: Many of our tours will be dual-narrative, usually with two guides representing different viewpoints.

01. To understand more deeply and directly the impact of the October 7, 2023 attack and the war in Gaza on Israelis and Israeli society and politics, and on the Palestinian people. This will happen through visiting memorials and exhibits and by hearing from Israelis and others who were directly affected by the events of October 7 and its aftermath.
02. To learn from multiple perspectives about the various proposals for peace and security from experts and advocates.
03. To understand how the many movements and organizations working toward co-existence, social justice, and civil rights have re-positioned themselves due to the war.
04. To build and reinforce participants' connection and engagement with Israel as a component of their Jewish identity and Jewish life.
05. To connect participants more deeply to their Jewishness and each other. To build a sense of community amongst the trip participants that they carry back to Sha'ar Zahav or other synagogue community, that serves as a reference point for future congregational engagement with Israel – such as invited speakers and other continued learning.
06. As a progressive, LGBTQIA+ identified community, to learn from progressive organizations in Israel who are advocating for equal rights under the law and building stronger communities and connections.

- 07. To expose and educate participants on the nuances and complexities of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the daily life and circumstances of its many ethnic and religious groups such that participants gain more understanding and capacity to form their own conclusions.
- 08. To develop an appreciation of Israel's long history, from Biblical times to the present, including an understanding of where and how our liturgy (Torah, Zohar) developed in the region, as well as an understanding of the events around modern Israel's founding and evolution.
- 09. To examine Israel's regional situation including climate, infrastructure, political, and social issues that require cross-national cooperation.

We will bring with us our own voices as American Jews, including the tangle of opinions and emotions around the war in Gaza, the situation in the West Bank, and the current and future well-being of all Israelis and Palestinians. As we strive to do always at Sha'ar Zahav, we will intentionally create a group space where all perspectives are welcome.

For this trip, we are reaching out earlier to some sibling queer-centric synagogues. We are in conversation with the following, and we look forward to potentially traveling with several members of these communities:

Bet Chaverim (Atlanta)
Beit Chayim Chadashim (Los Angeles)
Beit Mishpachah (Washington DC)

More Details:

Costs, subsidies, accessibility, REGISTRATION, and more

Estimated cost is \$4,100/person (not including air fare). Single room supplement – approx. \$1,000. Rabbi Copeland or another SZ clergy member will join the trip. Please note that this estimated cost covers all lodging, most meals, entrance and speakers' fees. It covers ground transportation, including a wheelchair-accessible bus. This cost excludes airfare and any extra days travelers may plan before or after the tour.

The SZ trip organizers and MEJDI are all committed to working closely with each traveler to create as accessible a trip as possible. If you have a disability, functional impairment, dietary need or any other access or accommodation concerns, please reach out to Patty Caplan (pcaplan@comcast.net) in advance and we can talk about how we can partner together to make the trip work for you. Please note that you will not individually be responsible for the cost of reasonable accommodations that you may need and we can reasonably provide.

Some subsidies may be available from the synagogue and generous donors. If cost is the only reason you may not join, we encourage you to speak to any of us (or the Rabbi or Cantor of your congregation).

At the same time, we encourage you to pursue your own resources - perhaps you have a family member, or friend or colleague, who would be willing to assist you in making this trip possible for you. People often appreciate being asked to support something meaningful to you.

Updated info will be posted here as we get it. See below for information on interest-free loans from Hebrew Free Loan.

**** Hebrew Free Loan is ready with interest-free loans to help with the trip.
(415-546-9902) www.hflasf.org

Applicants need two guarantors who have \$60k or more in income or liquid assets. One of the two guarantors needs to be a CA resident. If you need help in securing a second guarantor, contact the trip organizers (israeltrip2024@shaarzahav.org).

As an idea of what the loan repayment might look like, a \$3,000 loan could be paid back with 15 monthly payments of \$200 or 20 monthly payments of \$150 – depending on your budget.

HFLA is happy to consult on consolidating personal debt, which could be wrapped into funds for the trip. Be sure to tell them you are interested in the Sha'ar Zahav Israel trip when you contact them.

Any other trip-related questions can be sent to
IsraelTrip2024@shaarzahav.org

Our trip registration website will be fully updated with this year's information by June 1, 2024.

PLEASE NOTE: You CAN register for the tour without making an individual deposit at the time of registration. All travelers interested in joining the November tour (both travelers who were signed up for the 2023 tour and any new travelers) should register via the registration page without obligation.

An individual deposit will be due on or before August 15, 2024. Full payment will be due soon after, on September 5. We will give you more information on cancellation policies, travel insurance, and more, before you are required to make a financial commitment. We will also re-evaluate the situation vis a vis safety in early August.

Trip website with Registration Link:

[Israel from Many Angles: A Sha'ar Zahav Travel Experience – MEJDI Tours.](#)

Participants (and a note about children):

This trip is open to all Sha'ar Zahav members and family members. We have extended an invitation to members of 3 sibling shuls for a limited number of participants. We expect participation of between 17 and 25. If you would like to bring someone who is not an SZ member, please contact the organizers.

A note about children:

This trip is designed for adults - of all ages.

At the same time, it is a Sha'ar Zahav Community Trip, and traveling together, including families with children, will be a blessing, should parents choose to travel this way.

If you are considering bringing children of any age, please note the following:

i. Our pacing is set for adults - it includes downtime and transition time, but perhaps not enough for young children or babies. Daily itineraries will become available closer to departure.

ii. Visits, sites, presentations, and group reflections and discussions will include adult topics (such as the October 7 attack, the war in Gaza, the Holocaust, sexuality, conflict, etc.) and may be emotionally sensitive, provocative, and challenging at times.

iii. It will be the responsibility of the parents to care for their children during any activities in which the children cannot participate. (There are some lovely play areas at two of our three hotels, and parks nearby the third.)

iv. We strongly recommend that two parents/adults travel together if a young child is joining - in order to share the responsibility.

Please feel free to reach out to organizers with any questions.

Security

MEJDI's Security Strategy

Despite the tense political situation, MEJDI, the tour operator, has facilitated safe travel experiences since October 7, 2023. Once conditions were deemed safe, MEJDI began leading groups and mission trips to the region to foster a comprehensive understanding of the current conflict. For each experience, MEJDI carefully and successfully employed its longstanding safety protocols.

MEJDI informs us that its guides receive timely security guidance from Israel's national Ministry of Tourism and other agencies. MEJDI also disseminates to its guides a daily safety profile assessment of tour areas from an established network of partners in Israel, the West Bank, and areas under Palestinian Authority jurisdiction. These assessments may lead to itinerary revision. If you have more questions, please reach out to israeltrip2024@shaarzahav.org.

US State Department Advisory

The US State Department Advisory is in flux given the ongoing conflict in Gaza and the surrounding area and along Israel's northern border, especially in the northernmost areas of the Golan Heights.

Currently (as of early June 2024), the only area in the immediate region that is a "Do Not Travel" zone per the US State Department is the Gaza Strip. There are specific instructions to avoid the area around Gaza and near Israel's borders with Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. Israel and the West Bank have a "Reconsider Travel" advisory.

Heartfelt Thanks

Many many thanks for planning and consultation:

Patty Caplan, Daniel Loftus, Andy Schwartz, Rachel Nilson Ralston, Arthur Slepian, Ron Lezell, Marc Lipschutz, and Rabbi Copeland.

Patty Caplan has been at the helm of this ship and has put in uncountable time and energy and heart into this trip. I can't thank her enough. We are also very grateful to Bonnie Kates for stepping in to co-coordinate parts of the 2024 trip.

Some highlights from MEJDI's website:

A Better Tour Company for the World

Global Leader in Socially Conscious Travel.

Dedicated to providing customized itineraries for travel groups as diverse as our destinations, MEJDI Tours is full-service tour company ... founded on the belief that tourism should be a vehicle for a more positive and interconnected world.

MEJDI-which translates to both “honor” and “respect”-was established to achieve one goal: change the face of tourism through a socially responsible business model that honors both clients and communities.

A Values-Based Approach to Tourism

As a certified [B Corp](#), which harnesses the power of business for social change, MEJDI rejects the model of traditional consumer tourism-a highly commercialized experience that supports big business and often damages local communities-instead employing a new model of tourism based on clients, communities, and financial and environmental sustainability.

An estimated 1 billion people travel every year. MEJDI Tours sees this as 1 billion opportunities to make a difference. MEJDI Tours is dedicated to opening hearts and expanding minds, inviting clients to become cultural explorers while engaging and supporting the global communities we serve.

Travel Insurance options from MEJDI

Medical/Health insurance as well as Travel Insurance is **STRONGLY RECOMMENDED** for travel to Israel. Now is the time to review your current health insurance coverage policy and look into Travel Insurance Options.

Purchasing travel insurance to Israel may be difficult as many providers may not cover Israel since the attacks of October 7, 2023. One of our partners, IMG Travel, has added Israel back as a covered destination - but with limitations. They are not offering a Cancel For Any Reason (CFAR) policy, nor will they cover losses due to, arising, or resulting from the conflict in Israel. That being said, it does cover the standard cancellation reasons (illness, death in the family, etc).

Additionally, you should check with the search site [Yonder Travel](#) to see if they have added any additional travel insurance providers that have reinstated Israel as a covered location.

Click here for additional information on [Travel Insurance and Recommended Providers](#).

Readings and Recordings of Interest

Recent articles by Thomas Friedman
[NYT Articles - Thomas L. Friedman](#)

Democracy Now
[Israel & Palestine | Democracy Now!](#)

Essays from T'ruah
[Israel / Palestine | T'ruah](#)

Interview with Dr. Gabor Mate
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOWJM9RfRD8&t=0s>

Two Tour Guides—One Israeli, One Palestinian—Offer a New Way to See the Holy Land | Smithsonian

Books:

Can We Talk About Israel (2021), by Daniel Sokatch (CEO of New Israel Fund)
The Arc of a Covenant: the United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People (2022) by Walter Russell Mead
The Lemon Tree (2006), by Sandy Tolan
Wandering Star (2006) by JMG Le Clezio

Podcasts:

For Heaven's Sakes
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/for-heavens-sake/id1522222281>

Ha'aretz Podcast
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/haaretz-podcast/id1440719849>

Ezra Klein Show
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-disastrous-relationship-between-israel/id1548604447?i=1000655897690>