

Canadian Delegation in Israel: “It’s a privilege to be here”

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Small communities mission organized by JNF Winnipeg embarks on a week-long tour of JNF Canada-supported projects all around Israel.

A delegation of donors and Friends from JNF Winnipeg (a small communities’ mission) arrived in Israel for a visit designed to strengthen their connection with the country and view a variety of JNF Canada-supported projects. For a week the delegates toured Israel from north to south and visited projects in the Golan Heights, Rosh HaNikra, Tzfat, the Dead Sea, and, of course Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.



JNF Canada Small Communities Mission group photo in Tzora Forest. Photo: Yoav Devir

Among the projects supported by [JNF Canada](#) that the delegates visited were the [large stone hall and viewing balcony](#) in the Western Wall Tunnels, [Hula Lake Park](#) in northern Israel, [Megiddo High School](#) and the John Baird Park in Sderot.

“Every time you visit Israel you can see the changes, and you can feel them even more,” said Rabbi **Moshe Jeremy Parnes** from Regina in Saskatchewan. “It was very important to me to come here with friends from my community and show them the country. Touring the Golan was especially exciting, as the last time I visited it was straight after the Six-Day War.”

The delegates, Jews and non-Jews, had come from all over Canada – from Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon and elsewhere. Some had visited Israel many times before, while for others this was their first visit.

Planting a tree at the [KKL-JNF planting center in Tzora Forest](#) (also known as the President’s Forest) was one of the most symbolic and exciting moments of their trip. “This is an opportunity to take part in an unforgettable event unique to JNF – planting a tree in Israel,” declared KKL-JNF’s Canada Desk Director **Osnat Dvorkin**.

“Planting a tree is an inseparable part of Jewish tradition,” explained **Eran Zabadi**, who is in charge of the KKL-JNF planting center. “Trees symbolize life itself and represent hope, growth and prosperity. Unlike trees in Canada, most of those in Israel have been planted by human hands. Today you are going to become part of this heritage.”

The [Tzora Forest](#) extends over around eleven thousand dunam (approx 2,750 acres) in the Judean Foothills to the north of Beit Shemesh. This is the land of the Biblical hero Samson, and it is where the Israelites battled the Philistines. The highest points in the forest, which are about four hundred meters above sea level, plunge steeply down southwards to the broad valley of Nahal Sorek. Tzora Ridge, which is situated inside the forest, offers a magnificent view of the Coastal Plain, the Judean Foothills and the Judean Hills. The woodland is especially beautiful at this time of year, when a whole variety of wildflowers burst into bloom. KKL-JNF has equipped the forest with numerous recreation areas and scenic lookout points, and has marked out trails for walkers.

Ruth Friedman of Montreal joined the excursion to Israel together with her daughter **Miriam**. “I visited Israel forty-six years ago, and the State has grown amazingly since then, but it’s still beautiful,” said Ruth. “It’s a privilege to be here, and the opportunity to explore the country with my daughter is a wonderful experience for us both.” Her daughter Miriam added, “It’s a marvelous gift for a mother and daughter to travel together, especially here in Israel.”



Looking towards Gaza with Kobi Harush, Sderot Military Security Chief. Photo: Yoav Devir

“Israel has surpassed all my expectations,” declared **Anaik Berneche** of Regina, who was visiting the country for the first time. “I’ve always felt Jewish, and a year ago I chose to convert. Visiting these places that I’ve always heard and read about is a life-changing experience. I’ve no doubt that I’ll be back here again for another visit.”

From the planting center in the President’s Forest, the group moved on to Sderot in the Gaza Periphery, where they met **Kobi Harush**, the city’s military security chief, who described life in the shadow of the current security situation. From a hill on the edge of town the visitors looked across towards the Gaza Strip, and saw for themselves how very close the border is – just a few hundred meters away.

“We’ve built a beautiful city here and we have a good life, but being next to the border is a challenge, and it’s not easy,” said Kobi Harush. From their vantage point on the hill, the delegates could observe the Israeli forces as they searched for terrorists’ tunnels along the border. “We can say for certain that there are tunnels along here, but we’re preparing to deal with them,” explained Harush.

The Sderot Police Station hosts a display of Qassam rockets that were fired at the city. In the past sixteen years, out of a total of over 28,000 rockets fired at Israel, 8,600 were aimed at Sderot. “We live in a city where the difference between life and death is fifteen seconds,” said Harush. He described to the visitors how mothers have to decide which of their children to hustle first to safety when the alarm sounds, in the certain knowledge that they have no hope of getting them all inside in time. And, of course, apart from the physical harm suffered by its residents, the city also has to deal with large numbers of people who experience shock and trauma. “All of us undergo disturbing experiences here, but we’re strong and we’ll continue to live here and to build and develop the city,” concluded Harush.

“For years I always wanted to visit Israel, but I was concerned about the [security situation](#),” confessed **Barry Landen** of Toronto. “But there’s a special feel to Israel, and I feel completely safe here. I feel that I’ve come home, because this is my history and my heritage,” he said.

“I’m proud to be here in Israel, it’s something I always knew I had to do,” said his wife **Pauline Landen**. “It’s amazing to see what Israel has managed to achieve here. I’m not a religious person, but this is definitely a spiritual experience.”
