

Back Open for Tourism, Israel Turns a Dramatic Corner

A dominant topic of conversation at last week's National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Nashville was the reopening of tourism to Israel for all—vaccinated and unvaccinated alike. Two years ago, at the same event and location, the early impact of the COVID virus started to be felt with early reports of Israel's national airline laying off the first 1,000 employees.

Ultimately, nearly all tourism would be shut down leading to millions of cancellations, tens of thousands of Israelis in tourism and tourism related industries losing their jobs and deep economic hardships, the ripple effects of which are still being felt.

Two years later, the sense of returned opportunities to visit Israel and restored tourism are breeding hope and optimism.

Eyal Carlin, Israel's tourism commissioner for North America, amplified the hope.

"We are already seeing tourists coming back, and bookings for peak seasons in the fall are near pre-pandemic levels," Carlin says. "One of the important reasons to be at the NRB Convention this week is because while Israel opened for all tourists as of March 1, many people do not know that yet. We want to get the word out that Israel is open for tourism again, so people can plan their trips that have been delayed because of the pandemic, or just the dream trip that people have been looking forward to."

The sense of optimism was echoed by Robert Vander Maten, president of Noseworthy Travel, which specializes in Christian tourism to Israel. The past two years have been devastating for many specializing in Christian tourism to Israel.

Noseworthy has deferred dozens of groups tours, rescheduling some groups repeatedly, while waiting for tourism to reopen.

Vander Maten spoke very personally, noting that bringing Christians to Israel is more than a business—it's a passion. He described his first trip to Israel in 1986 as "life-changing," and has been bringing Christians to Israel ever since. "Before I got to visit Israel that first time, I prayed to be able to do so for 10 years. Then in 1986, God gave me the opportunity to go," he says. He gave voice to what many Christians feel about Israel, that despite the frustrations of not being able to come visit, there is only one Israel and there is always the desire for Christians to visit.

Joel James, another specialist in Christian tourism to Israel, vice president of Inspiration Cruises and Tours, shared optimism while noting how much potential was lost. "We are thrilled to have groups going back to Israel. Right now, we have 300 travelers from the U.S. finishing a tour with pastor and author Max Lucado, and in two weeks we will have 650 Join Dr. David Jeremiah for his tour. It's very encouraging to be able to bring people back to Israel. These numbers seem like a lot after two years of virtually no tourists entering the country, but the truth is that both of these would be double their size had it not been for the previous rules and mandates. Unfortunately, several other tours canceled due to uncertainty. Nevertheless, we are blessed to know that the mandates have been lifted and things will be easier for people to come to Israel in the future."

At the NRB's Israel Breakfast (about which there will be a parallel report), a related topic and new initiative was discussed regarding the phenomena of churches giving their pastors a trip to Israel, often on their retirement. Many have realized that such a gift should be made as an investment when a pastor is young, not retiring. Carlin and others mentioned that it's a trend that people are discussing how to change, because a trip to Israel is such a life-changing spiritual

experience. Speaking of all possible tourists, Carlin said, "Now that tourism is back, people should plan to make that trip soon, not pushing it off as a bucket list item, but to change their lives forever."

Looking ahead, Carlin believes that by 2024 at the latest, Israel's tourism will fully return to the pre-pandemic record level. Asked if they worried that another variant of the virus might set things back and shut tourism down again, Vander Maten observed that we're now seeing a two-year pent-up demand being able to be realized. "I really don't see Israel shutting down again."

Carlin agreed. Israel has turned a corner.

He joked that he's not a prophet, but if something unforeseen were to happen again, he says it wouldn't be just in and about Israel—that the problem would be much greater. {eoa}

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He is president of the Genesis 123 Foundation, which builds bridges between Jews and Christians, and writes regularly for a variety of prominent Christian and conservative websites. *Inspiration from Zion* Inspiration from Zion is the popular webinar series and podcast that he hosts. He can be reached at InspirationfromZion@.

Read articles like this one and other Spirit-led content in our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.