

Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister See Great Awakening

As Israelis welcomed home IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, after five years of numbing captivity in Gaza this week, over 6,000 Christians from more than 80 nations paraded through the streets of Jerusalem in a solidarity march with Israel that culminated their celebration of the biblical Feast of Tabernacles, an annual gathering, sponsored by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

Seated on the official viewing stand outside the historic King David Hotel, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat was among the tens of thousands of Israelis lining the streets to greet Feast pilgrims and witness the colorful display of support. Many pilgrims wore traditional costumes and waved their national flags.

A number of marchers held signs saying, "Welcome home Gilad" and "Israel is not alone." Others handed out small flags, candy and gifts to smiling children.

"We are so grateful about Gilad Shalit's release! It's been a prayer that has been going on for a long time and we are so thankful. That's fabulous news during this great week," said Shay Kasper of Los Angeles.

"All the Jerusalem marches have been wonderful. We see more and more love going from both sides, from the Christians and the Israelis together," added Kasper, who has attended the annual Feast gathering every year since 1981.

"It was good for our Feast pilgrims from around the world to be here to express our solidarity on such a momentous day, as they also experienced firsthand what Israel was going through as Gilad Shalit returned home," said ICEJ executive director Dr. Juergen Buehler. "Our pilgrims will no doubt return to

their own nations with a deeper appreciation of Israel's unique challenges and an even stronger commitment to standing with the Jewish state and people."

Barkat relished his role as parade marshal, diving into the waves of Christian pilgrims on several occasions to shake hands and embrace his city's visitors from around the globe. When the lead banner of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem passed by, he jumped to his feet again and marched alongside it to the roaring approval of Christians and Israelis alike.

The weeklong ICEJ Feast began last Thursday in the Jerusalem Convention Center and ended on Tuesday night with a "grand finale," featuring Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon.

"As a Jew and a representative of the Government of Israel, I welcome you here—Christians from all walks of life—to celebrate your faith, to praise God and to bless Israel," Ayalon said in a powerful send-off address.

"There is a great awakening here in Israel and around the world of the need for the 'coming together' of Jews and Christians to keep God's commandments," Ayalon added. "God is sending you home as watchmen of Israel, so that His purpose will be fulfilled."

Among the 80-plus nations represented at this year's Feast were delegations from Australia, Brazil, China, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Thailand and the United States. Beside their interest in Shalit's release, Christian visitors were closely following the ongoing diplomatic battle over Palestinian statehood at the United Nations.

"I came here to pray for Israel," said Shola, a first time pilgrim from Nigeria, which currently holds a seat on the Security Council. "We have heard that our president supported

Israel in the U.N. and that made us very glad, and we hope he will keep supporting Israel.”

“There are about 200 Chinese at the Feast this year, which is a record for us,” said Deborah, a first time pilgrim from Beijing. “Many churches are praying and working to help Israel. You would be amazed how many Chinese people’s hearts are on fire for this country!”

“This year’s Feast has again underlined ICEJ’s message that Israel is not isolated but has millions of Christian advocates and admirers worldwide. Large delegations from some exciting new countries demonstrate that this support is growing,” concluded Buehler.