

Rashida and Ilhan's Excellent Adventure

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has wisely decided to permit Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar to visit Israel. Now Israel must make the most of this trip, which the two Congresswomen plan to use to further their anti-Israel agenda. The Israelis should suggest, in the most respectful possible way, that while Rashida and Ilhan will be giving most of their attention to the "Palestinians," "we would be pleased to show certain places of significance in Jewish and Israeli history." If the Congresswomen accept, those sites will tell a tale, not just to them, but through the members of the media accompanying them on their visit, to the American public. And if they refuse to visit these sites, they will be put in a bad light, seen as unwilling to consider the visible evidence of the Jewish connection to the land.

At the airport in Tel Aviv, the Israeli officials welcoming

them should include Jews from Arab lands, as well as Indian Jews, Yemeni Jews, and Ethiopian Jews (far darker than Ilhan Omar or Rashida), reminding the world that Israel's Jews come from all over, and that Israel is not a "colonial-settler project" of "racist" white European Jews imposed on the Middle East. Many of those journalists covering the brief airport ceremony, and their cameramen, will note this multiracial aspect of the welcoming committee.

Then the Israelis should take Rashida and Ilhan on their excellent adventure to "places that we hope you will want to learn about, places that provide you with more than 2000 years of Jewish history." What can Rashida and Ilhan say? "Sorry, no. We came here to visit only the Palestinians, who get so little attention," a palpably absurd remark about the most-reported-on minority in the world. And were they to reply "We are not here for a history lesson," that wouldn't go over well; what are they afraid of learning? So I'm betting they would have to agree to see at least some of the things the Israelis wish to show them.

What places would one wish to show them? Here are ten suggestions:

1. The Dead Sea Scrolls at the Israel Museum, a visible reminder that Jews were already living in the Land of Israel in 150 B.C., when the first scrolls were written. What better evidence of the Jewish presence, 800 years before any Muslim Arabs arrived?

2. Masada, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where Jews – survivors of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans – held out against far larger Roman forces that besieged them, until the last fighters, with their families, decided to commit suicide rather than surrender to the Romans in 73 A.D. Again, a reminder of the early Jewish presence, and Jewish tenacity, early on.

The tour guide might also explain to Rashida and Ilhan, and their media entourage, that it was the Roman king Hadrian who, in the Second Century A.D., determined to wipe out the Jewish identity of Israel-Judah-Judea, imposed the name "Palastina" or "Palestine." At the same time, he changed the name of Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina. Another important history lesson, one which explains the use of the toponym "Palestine" to deny the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel.

3. The Western Wall, the holiest site in Judaism, built about 20 B.C., is part of the retaining wall of the Temple Mount. Their visit should include the briefest of commentaries, in which they – and the reporters accompanying them – are reminded that Jews had always been allowed to pray at the Western Wall, except from 1949 to 1967, when the Jordanians held the Old City.

4. A walk through the Old City. The visitors – and accompanying cameras – will see for themselves that the Jewish Quarter looks quite different from the Muslim, Christian, and Armenian Quarters. Their buildings are all old stone, while – the guide explains – "the Jewish Quarter, as you can see, looks positively brand new. And that's because it is. So much of it was destroyed by the Jordanians, including 58 synagogues that were demolished, that it had to be largely rebuilt after 1967. That's why it looks so new." What can Ilhan and Rashida respond?

5. The Jewish Cemetery on the Mount of Olives. This is the oldest and most important Jewish cemetery in Israel. Burial on the Mount of Olives started some 3,000 years ago in the days of the First Temple, and continues to this day. The cemetery contains anywhere between 70,000 and 150,000 tombs. Here Rashida and Ilhan should be shown the oldest of tombstones, testifying to the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel dating back to 1000 B.C. They should also be shown the places where 38,000 tombstones had once been, but were uprooted by Arabs during the Jordanian occupation of the Old City, with some of

the tombstones used to line the floors of Jordanian army latrines, and others crushed into gravel and used at building sites.

6. Yad Vashem. The well-known photograph that shows the meeting of Haj Amin Al Husseini, the leader of the Palestinian Arabs from the 1920s to the late 1940s, with Adolf Hitler, properly enlarged, should be put up on a wall at Yad Vashem where the visitors cannot avoid seeing it. The guides at Yad Vashem can explain in a few sentences who Al Husseini was and what he did during the war years from 1940 to 1945, when he lived contentedly in Nazi Berlin. Al-Husseini urged Hitler not to let any Jews escape to Palestine; he helped raise three brigades of S.S. troops from among Bosnian Muslims; he became friends with Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Eichmann, in whose company he may have visited Auschwitz. During this time his popularity rose among the Arabs in Palestine; after the war he resumed his role as leader of the Palestine Arabs, with no Arabs objecting to his Nazi connection. It was only after the Arab defeat in the 1948-49 war, for which some Arabs blamed him, that Al-Husseini lost his position as leader of the Palestine Arabs, and went into exile in Cairo.

7. The Knesset. A quick visit to Israel's parliament, where Ilhan and Rashida – and the reporters accompanying them – will see this raucous institution at work. Among the members of the Knesset are twelve Arab MKs, some of them routinely denouncing Israel, while other Arab MKs – this might surprise Ilhan and Rashida – are members of the Zionist Union and Likud parties. Jewish and Arab MKs can thus be seen on camera expressing themselves to their heart's content, in the Middle East's only democracy.

8. Hadassah Hospital, where Jewish and Arab doctors and nurses work side by side, and the patients – again, both Jewish and Arab – receive the highest standard of care in the Middle East. Let Tlaib and Omar meet the Palestinian doctors on staff who have received their medical training in Israel, and Arab

patients who are being treated, often for free, thanks to the Peres Center and other charities, in Israeli hospitals. It might make them reconsider their views about those “oppressive” Israelis.

9. The Technion or the Weizmann Institute of Science. Either will do, for both provide a view of Israel as the original start-up nation. Rashida and Ilhan will no doubt be surprised at the astonishing list of Israeli inventions and innovations. In the field of medicine alone, they could learn about Israeli advances in the last few years, including: new ways of treating multiple sclerosis and pancreatic cancer; new aids to coping with loss of limbs (ReWalk), new diagnostic techniques (the Sniffphone), new medical devices (the PillCam, the Flexible Stent). Even if they refuse to be impressed, the members of the media will still have conveyed the information about these Israeli achievements to the American public.

10. Finally, they might briefly visit a startup Israeli company where innovations are brought to market, and where the workforce consists of Jews and Arabs. This ruins the narrative that Tlaib and Omar have been feeding the American public, about cruel Israelis and miserably treated Palestinians.

Summary: The Congresswomen, and the American public, will be given rapid but indelible lessons about the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel. They will have seen the Dead Sea Scrolls (150 B.C.), the Western Wall (20 B.C.), Masada (73 A.D.), the venerable and vandalized Mt. of Olives Cemetery (the oldest tombs date from 1000 B.C.), each offering a very different kind of mute testimony to the Jews in their land. At Yad Vashem, they – and the American public – will learn about the connection of the man who was leader of the Palestinian Arabs for nearly 30 years, Haj Amin Al-Husseini, to the Nazis and the Holocaust. They will glimpse Israel’s rambunctious democracy at work in the Knesset, a sharp contrast to the authoritarian rule in the Palestine Authority, where the colossally corrupt Mahmoud Abbas, with his 400-million-dollar

family fortune, was last “elected” to a four-year-term in 2005, and hasn’t felt the need to hold an election since. Then they will see Israel at work: Jewish and Arab medical personnel together treating Jewish and Arab patients with equal solicitousness; Jews and Arabs working side by side in research, development, and manufacturing, in all sorts of companies, but especially in high tech. One example of such collaboration the Israelis might want to mention is the tech company Mellanox, recently sold to the American company NVIDIA. The Arab engineers at Mellanox are set to share a \$3.5 million payout. Not exactly the “oppression” that Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib insist is the real story of Israel.

Let their excellent adventure in the Land of Israel be turned into a teaching moment. Not for them, but for the American and world public, who will be kept informed by the reporters and cameramen who accompany them. It’s not what they wanted or expected, but they weren’t what many of us wanted or expected. So let’s just call it even.

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