

Leeuwarden, November 21-24, 2008

Models of Cooperation - Egypt – Israel – Jordan - Palestine

Your Excellencies, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen,

The Middle East over the last 60 years witnessed 10 wars, - more than two wars per decade, and there are low intensity hostilities during much of the time, The Middle East is daily mentioned in newspapers, radio and television and often in a negative way. No wonder that much of the general public around the world would think that most Israelis are soldiers and many Arabs are terrorists. But don't believe the media, - they do not tell the full story. There is cooperation between Arabs and Jews but they don't hit the headlines. We have cooperation in medicine, agriculture, trade and commerce and - in tourism. Tourism knows no borders and by working together, all benefit. One such organization is the Tourism4Peace Forum, consisting of Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian leading tourism professionals. It was established by the Israel Hotel Managers Association with the assistance of the Peres Center for Peace.

I am going to talk about the T4P tomorrow. Now, I have a proposal for you:

Even though war is the enemy of tourism, can we turn the Middle East conflict into a marketing tool? Did you know that tourism is booming in the Middle East today, - at least did until the Wall Street meltdown this month. Let me give you some figures:

In Israel, There was a 25% increase of international visitors in 2007 and this year the increase is even higher. Revenue from tourism will be over 3.6 billion dollars in 2008, over 20% increase each year during the last 2 years.

If the quiet in our region continues and Wall Street recovers, our Tourist Ministry forecasts 5 million tourists per year by 2014 at a revenue of 6.5 billion dollars, or 7% of Israel GNP. In Palestine the situation was similar to Israel, since most tourists visit Israel and Palestine together. In 2000 there were almost 850 thousand visitors to Bethlehem and 326 thousand to the rest of Palestine, Tourist arrivals to Bethlehem went down to 8 thousand in 2 years, but by last year climbed to 510 thousand. This year, Bethlehem saw 600 thousand visitors in the first 6 months alone. Number of visitors to the rest of Palestine climbed back to the 2000 level in 2007 and there is a further 30% increase this year. Jordan had over 50% increase in tourism from 4.6 million to 8.5 million tourists over the last 7 years - over 20% each year during last two years alone, During that time, income from tourists more than doubled from 740 thousand to close to about 1, 9 billion dollars a year In 2007 the growth of income was 24%, this year, it expected to be over 20%.

There is a lot of hotel building going on in Jordan. Many beautiful hotels are being constructed on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea, in Petra in Aqaba at the Red Sea and elsewhere. Egypt is a superpower in tourism. During 2007 ten and a half million tourists visited Egypt, a 10% increase from the year before and this year there is again a 10% increase or more. In 2006, - the last year I have figures for, - Egypt's income from tourism was 8 billion dollars. This figure increases faster than the number of tourists as more high quality hotels are opened and the room rates are higher, Between 300 and 600 thousand Israelis visit Egypt yearly, mostly the Sinai Peninsula, since Israelis can enter the Sinai without visas. Noga Urieli discussed that yesterday.

Why do tourists visit the Middle East?

There are many reasons tourists visit the Middle East or "The Holy Lands", as we call them. They are the cradle of the 3 main religions. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the

Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall in Jerusalem are the main religious sights of the 3 religions. Some come to see the incomparable antiquities in Egypt, in Petra, Jericho and Jerusalem; yet others are seeking the sea and the sun in Sharm el Sheich and in the Red Sea Riviera triangle of Taba-Eilat-Aqaba. The Dead Sea in Israel and Jordan, - the lowest point on earth, - have unparalleled medicinal qualities.

Most of the tourists to the area come from Western Europe and North America. New markets include Eastern Europe and Russia, the Far East with its large Muslim and Christian population and Latin America. There are daily flights between Israel and Jordan and almost daily flights between Egypt and Israel. Many tourists pass the border overland on the Jordan bridge between Jordan and Israel and in Taba between the Sinai and Israel.

In short, the Middle East offers history - religion – recreation – business and conferences tourism. In the era of globalization and the Internet, the interest is growing and distances seem smaller. In fact, there is so much interest, so many things to see in the Middle East that, as you see, not even the conflict can keep the tourists away. The areas and cities are safer in the Holy Lands than in many great cities in the Western world. Yet our image is far from being good and our mission is to change the present image. Mr. Abdul-Sahib Shakiri, Editor and Publisher of the "Islamic Tourism Magazine that appears in 5 languages handed out a long article on "The Role of Responsible Tourism in Consolidating World Peace". Its last paragraph on page 25 declares:

"Tourism is one of the most important means of integration, getting people of the world closer to each other and making their interaction and contact easier, in addition to helping civilizations integrate. Organizations concerned with tourism which are effective on the international stage should work to strengthen common principles and values, which the tourists and the host countries should duly respect, so that everyone can enjoy tourism in all its dimensions."

The fact that the Middle East conflict will be connected to tourism should create interest. The cooperation between Arabs and Jews and any Israeli - Palestinian act not connected to violence will spark further interest. The potential to develop international tourism in the area is great and we feel our actions will contribute to the peace process. In our activities among ourselves, all of us in each country of the Holy Lands must cultivate a culture of peace. We must get to know each other, expand people-to-people contact, encourage private sector cooperation, launch more joint ventures, activities, develop friendships. I have many friends in Palestine, Egypt and Jordan; we are in touch with each other over the phone or by Skype and see each other at least once a year.

Omar Moufakkir gave a presentation during the Tourism4Peace Forum Annual Conference that we held at this University two years ago. He said that there are three stages of peace: Negative peace, positive peace and participatory peace. We want to create a positive peace and then advance to the participatory peace. Good willing, Insh'Allah, Yirtze Hashem.

October 23, 2008 Janos Damon