



EASTER IN ISRAEL 2011



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Cover: Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Garrett Khoury/The Israel Project)

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ABOUT TIP

The Israel Project (TIP) is a non-profit educational organization that gets facts about Israel and the Middle East to press, public officials and the public. The Israel Project is not affiliated with any government.

Our team of trusted Middle East multi-lingual experts and former reporters provides journalists and leaders with fact sheets, backgrounders and sources. TIP regularly hosts press briefings featuring leading Israeli spokespeople and analysts that give journalists an opportunity to get information and answers to their questions face-to-face. By providing journalists with the facts, context and visuals they need, TIP enables hundreds of millions of people around the world to see a more positive public face of Israel. This helps protect Israel, reduce anti-Semitism and increase pride in Israel.

The Jerusalem Office

The Israel Project's (TIP) Jerusalem Office is a non-governmental resource working with foreign journalists and leaders based in Israel. It provides reporters and members of the diplomatic community with needed facts and information before they file their stories/reports. TIP's Jerusalem team features several Middle East experts and former journalists. TIP's Israel team, led by Marcus Sheff, includes experts who are fluent in English, Hebrew, Arabic, French, German, Farsi and Russian.

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Introduction

The Easter holiday season lasts for 50 days starting on Easter Sunday, which, in 2011, is April 17th. Easter itself has a number of meanings. Firstly, and most importantly, it is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ after his trial and crucifixion. It also has links to ancient celebrations of the beginning of spring and the end of winter - a resurrection story for Earth itself. Easter week often coincides with the Jewish holiday of Passover. Indeed, the Last Supper was a Passover *seder* celebration.

The Easter season, sometimes known as Eastertide, starts with Palm Sunday, which celebrates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Holy Monday celebrates the anointing of Jesus, on Holy Tuesday Jesus preached to the people of Jerusalem, and Holy Wednesday is the day that Judas Iscariot conspired to betray Jesus for 30 silver coins. Maundy Thursday is of special significance, celebrating the Last Supper and the act of betrayal by Judas. On Good Friday, also known as Jesus' Passion, Jesus was tried and crucified. The last day is Holy Saturday, also known as Silent Saturday, which celebrates Jesus' body being laid in its tomb. Easter Sunday is the day of Jesus' resurrection.

The Celebrations

The best place to witness the faith and celebration of Easter is in Jerusalem, one of the world's oldest and holiest cities (some 4,000 years). On Easter Day, Christians of all ethnicities gather in Jerusalem's Old City to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

The week is known as Holy Week and begins on Sunday with a gathering on the Mount of Olives to re-enact Christ's entry into Jerusalem, where he predicted his own fate to his followers. Though most Christians spend much of their time in prayer and at the various Christian holy places during the first half of the week, many take the opportunity to visit the holy places of the two other Abrahamic faiths. Monday of Holy Week is usually the time pilgrims choose to visit the Temple Mount and the Western Wall. Wednesday is a day to visit the Coenaculum, the place of Christ's Last Supper, where he administered the first Holy Communion to his disciples.

Good Friday is a day of epic celebration, with huge crowds gathering along the Ecce Homo archway, once gateway to the Roman Fortress of Antonia where the Roman governor Pontius Pilate turned over Jesus to the mob who had turned against him and placed a crown of thorns on his head, mocking him as the King of the Jews. On Via Dolorosa Street, Jesus carried his own crucifix. Today, followers bearing crosses stop at 14 Stations of the Cross, commemorating incidents along the way, the last 5 of which are inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, reputedly the site where Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected.

It is here on Saturday of Holy Week, in a tradition dating back some 800 years that a Muslim family unlocks the church and on this day only, the Sepulcher, thought to be the Tomb of Jesus is accessible to the public. Holy fire lights the candles, here and across the Christian world, symbolizing the resurrection of Christ.



Visitors to Jerusalem on Good Friday wend their way along the Via Dolorosa. (www.goisrael.com)



Visitors to Israel

April is the time of Easter and Passover, and as such, Israel sees a massive boom in tourism. It is not unusual in any given year for hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims, amongst others, to throng the streets of Jerusalem.

During April 2011, more than 250,000 visitors are expected to enter Israel, with Easter events predicted by the Ministry of Tourism to attract over 100,000 visitors.

Christians in Israel

Israel is considered by a majority of Christians to be a safe-haven for themselves and members of all faiths. Israel's Muslim, Christian and Jewish holy sites are open to people of all faiths.



"The fact is that the only place in the Middle East that Christians are really safe is Israel," Canon Andrew White, the 'Vicar of Baghdad'¹, told TIP.

He is vicar of Iraq's sole Anglican Church in Baghdad, St. George's, and chief executive of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East.

"Practically the only place in the region where the Christian population is growing is in Israel," reported *The New York Post* in December 2009.¹

"Christians are a shrinking minority in most countries of the Middle East today. The exception is Israel where the Christian community has multiplied several times over since 1949," said Geoffrey Smith, former Director of the Christian Friends of Israel - UK².

*"Two-thirds of native Arab Christians fled the Palestinian areas in the past six decades...Israel is the only country in the Middle East whose Christian population has grown in the past half-century,"*³ according to England's *Mail & Guardian*.

Israel's Growing Christian Population

¹ Avni, Benny "Christians flee Muslim pressure" *NY Post*, 23 December 2009
http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/bethlehem_exodus_jH6iVNuarsPLBceXPzHO6I Retrieved 05 December 2010

² See Christian Friends of Israel <http://www.cfi.org.uk/index.php>

³ Mail & Guardian, "Letters to the Editor: November 26 2010" Last updated 06 December 2010,
<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-12-01-letters-to-the-editor-november-26-2010> Retrieved 06 December 2010

In addition to the thousands of Christians that make pilgrimages to Israel's holy sites each year, Arab Christians, biblical Christians⁴ (associated with Evangelical Christians) and other Christian groups live in Israel.

In 1995, Israel's Christian population was 120,300. Israel's Christian population has grown some 26 percent since then. Most Christians in Israel are of Arab descent. Many others came from the former Soviet Union⁵ and immigrated to Israel with a Jewish relative. Ten percent of the Israeli Christians live in the Jerusalem district and 60 percent live in the north of the country.

Christians constitute about 2 percent of Israel's overall population, and their number is steadily growing. By the end of 2009, 151,700 Christians lived in Israel⁶, constituting a 0.6 percent increase from the previous year.

USEFUL LINKS

Christian Information Center - <http://www.cicts.org/CICmainin.htm>

Israel Wonders - http://goisrael.com/tourism_eng

International Christian Embassy Jerusalem - <http://www.icej.org/>

The Knesset Christian Allies Caucus - <http://www.cac.org.il/>

Bethlehem Municipality - <http://www.bethlehem-city.org/index.php>

Focus on Israel - The Christian Communities of Israel - http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/facts_percent20about_percent20israel/people/focus_percent20on_percent20israel_percent20-_percent20the_percent20christian_percent20communities_percent20of_percent20isr

Religious Freedom in Israel: A Fundamental Guarantee -

<http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=hsJPK0PIJpH&b=5118555&ct=6957333>

USEFUL CONTACTS

Ministry of Defence's Coordinator of Government Activities
in the Territories

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs
Prof. Justus Reid Weiner

⁴ See International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, <http://www.icejusa.org/site/PageServer>

⁵ Bassok, Moti "Central Bureau of Statistics: 2.1% of state's population is Christian" *HaAretz* 25 December 2007 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/central-bureau-of-statistics-2-1-of-state-s-population-is-christian-1.235862> Retrieved 05 December 2010

⁶ Statistical Abstract of Israel 2010, *Central Bureau of Statistics*, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_06x&CYear=2010

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Christian Israeli Police Officer
Nabil Isawi
Contact: Micky Rosenfeld
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THE BAPTIST CHURCH

Church of St. John the Baptist
Father Superior Dobromir
(*Italian*)
Tel: 00972 2 632 0000

East Jerusalem Baptist Church
Rev. Alex Awad
Tel: 00972 2 676 6479

International human rights lawyer, expert on the
Palestinian Christian minority
Tel: 009792 2 561 9281
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International Christian Embassy
David Parsons
Spokesman
Tel: 00972 52 381 6214

Christian-Jewish Studies Institute
Michel Romo
(*French, Italian*)
Tel: 00972 2 622 1049

Christian Information Centre
Tel: 00972 2 627 2692
Fax: 00972 2 628 6417
E-mail: cicinfo@cicts.org

Knesset Christian Allies Caucus
Shai Hermesh (*Kadima*)
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Robert Ilatov (*Israel Beitenu*)
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American Jewish Committee (AJC)
Chief Rabbi David Rosen
Director of Inter-Religious Affairs
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Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate
Archbishop Patriarchal Vicar of the Holy Land and
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Fax: 00972 2 627 7024

THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

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