



A Historic Meeting:

# *Tour Guides as a Bridge Between Humans*

Monday, 14 December 2015 — EcoME Center for Peace & Ecology — The Dead Sea

## OVERVIEW

During the December 2015 Season of Light – Holy Land darkest of times, many say – 34 women and men tour guides and six hosts eagerly arrived at the Dead Sea from the West Bank and Israel to face one another with the intention to become agents of change. Only two weeks earlier, a sole Israeli citizen had broadcast an invitation to Palestinian and Israeli tourism professionals to meet at the EcoME Center – <http://ecomecenter.org> – to invent how they might maximize their tour guiding to expose travelers to more diverse voices and places, and humanize everyone for those thousands of tourists they lead every year.

The carefully planned, facilitated day allowed the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish tour guides to discover one another, increase their own communication skills, find new meaning for their own personal and professional lives, and see themselves as bridges of understanding. Participants said: "Why did no one think of this before?" "Today was like water in the desert." The facilitator said: "It was all about being together, feeling one in our shared vision, collectively inspiring each other, believing we can influence change. We tour guides experienced Light."

## THE INVITATION

This [Facebook Invitation](#) was in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, as was the [Registration Information](#).

*In our reality, where there is a lack of encounter between people  
from different backgrounds and different senses of identity,  
where relationships stay harsh and distant  
We would like to welcome tour guides to explore together  
how we can become a bridge between cultures, nations, ethnic groups and religions,  
in order to create a consciousness of understanding and closeness  
for thousands of travelers and tourists coming from abroad, as well as for many local residents.*

*We will be holding our first meeting at EcoME Center for Peace & Ecology  
located at Almog Junction, on Monday 14.12.2015, from 10am-3pm.  
The meeting will include a vegetarian meal. Suggested donation is 30NIS.  
For registration and information contact Elad — [EladVazana@gmail.com](mailto:EladVazana@gmail.com)*

Important cross-cultural planning included Palestinian assistance with writing and Arabic translation of the Invitation, and interpreting during the meeting.

## THE DAY

January 14, 2015, the 34 tour guides came from the West Bank – Bethlehem, Nablus, Hebron, Jericho – and from East and West Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Hukuk, Nataf, and Modi'in.

Curious, eager, intimate, and open, from the outset, they were authentic and participatory while pouring themselves into their shared experiences. They were delighted to finally be together face-to-face.



### **The 10:00 AM Beginning**

Participants were given tea and name tags in three languages: Arabic, Hebrew, and English. New people kept arriving and initiating contact with one another. You could see they cared about making a change. The atmosphere was calm.

The initiator-facilitator, Israeli tour guide Elad Vazana of Tour For Change – <http://www.tour4change.com> – clarified in Hebrew and Arabic why he believed in the importance of this meeting and how much tour guides can make a real-life difference. The carefully planned morning and afternoon then continued within participants asking to begin using English. A Palestinian participant explained: "English is a bridge between us."

Everyone sat in a circle of careful listening, while hearing each participant's name, home town, and what about this life of tour guiding makes her or him come alive.

### **The Facilitator's Context Statement**

*Today as we meet, relationships between "others" are becoming harder and harder, and our peoples are more and more separated by fear and hatred. There is almost no contact between us.*

*And every violence event brings another. Without change, the cycle is endless: Violence, then Distance, then more Ignorance and Demonization and Fear, leading more Violence.*

*Transforming this cycle means meeting each other face-to-face. When people meet each other they transform. When we hear each others' stories we change forever, with more empathy and goodwill.*

*Many understand this but don't know how to meet or create a meeting. Many can't even imagine a meeting is possible. When enough people have met each other violence will decline more and more.*

*Today we in this room are investing in hope. If there is a chance for peace here in five or fifty years, then someone must invest in relationships and the trust that results.*

*We, the tour guides, are walking a lot in many important places, especially in Jerusalem, the most sensitive. We, the tour guides, bring people of diverse backgrounds to visit in places where the "other" lives.*



*How can we, the tour guides, use this opportunity to bring understanding through meetings that allow the so-called-others become less demonized and more human to our tour groups, and also present the people in our groups as equally human?*

*How can I, the tour guide, be an example of accepting others as they are? What story or information can bring understanding where there is ignorance, complexity where there are stereotypes, closeness where there is distance between humans?*

*How can I give people the experience of the many faces and stories of reality of which each of us sees one a small part?*

*How can I bring to eager travelers the voice of the other? Where can I find speakers who inspire our groups that there is another way, that awaken our humanity despite the despair? And what are their phone number?*

*Today, let us inspire each other to find answers to all this questions.*

### **Face-to-Face Experiences**

The participants were asked to stand and begin walking faster and faster among one another. Then they were instructed to slow down and begin seeing one another, making eye contact. Then they stopped in pairs, to look more deeply into the partner's eyes.

Then each partner was asked to affirm that the other can have a significant role to play in creating change in the world, already has the needed skills, and is in the right place at the right time. The partners thanked one another and continued walking.

Slowing down to meet a second partner, they answered to one another: "What is the biggest challenge we are facing?" Then they walked again to engage a new partner.

The new pair heard from one another: "What brings me hope?"

Then two pairs become a group of four that sat together.



For 25 minutes, each of the four shared a time in their life or work when they succeeded to build a bridge between humans or created new understanding that brought people together.

For 30 minutes back in the big circle, the Palestinians and Jews continued their beautiful sharing: "What touched you in the conversations you just experienced? What new insights did you realize?" The facilitator continued emphasizing the importance of careful listening.

For 20 minutes, EcoME host Goni Zilberman and her volunteer staff offered a generous tour of the inspiring facility by the Dead Sea managed by Israelis and Palestinians, and designed for sustainable living and relationship building — a potential site to bring tourists and to create future meetings together.

Sharing a delicious vegetarian lunch, there was vibrant conversation and sharing of more stories and contact information.

Back in the large circle, inspiring speakers described five existing, successful initiatives of tourism as a bridge:

**Tiyul-Rihla-Trip** — <http://www.tiyul-rihla.org>

**Mejdi Tours** — <http://www.mejditours.com>

**Green Olive Tours** — <http://www.toursinenglish.com>

**Mt. Zion Initiative** — <http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=431808>

**Tour For Change** — <http://www.tour4change.com>

For 50 minutes, three groups then formed to brainstorm new ideas for "being a bridge and building trust." Each group had a facilitator and scribe to record ideas. They returned to the large group to share insights and new collective intelligence before returning to their homes.

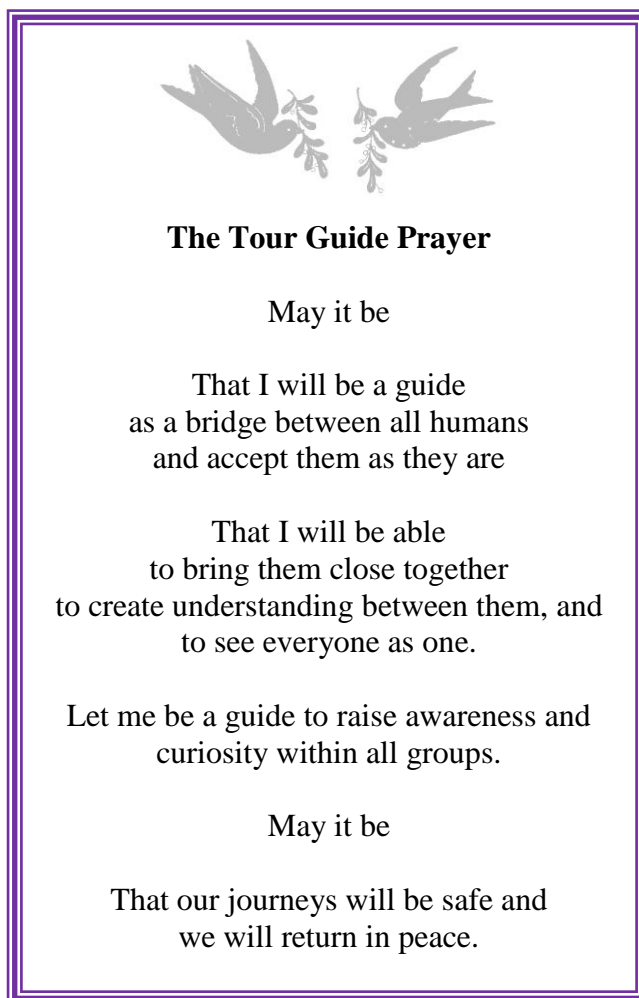
With new ideas in the air, participants expressed much appreciation. "This should have happened a long time ago." "We must do much more."

The day started rainy and cloudy. Throughout the day sunlight increasingly filled the sky.

The room became full of light.



Before leaving, each person received this prayer that can be recited before each day of guiding.



A senior citizen, tour guide, and life-long activist said: *"I have never been to such an amazing, well-planned meeting."*

*"Today opened up a whole new world of meaningfulness for my work as a tour guide." "I see that we can add significantly to creating change."*

*"Now I realize there are so many others who see themselves as a bridge." "We can inspire and learn from each other."*

This meeting was conceived, planned, and done in two weeks' time, a quality of creativity in this citizen-driven public peace process of civil engagement and human security. During the following days, others who heard about the meeting had already asked to join the next workshop.

## GROUP BRAINSTORMING



1. **Being a Tour Guide Who Serves as a Bridge**
2. **Diverse Experiences — Places to Go, Speakers to Hear**
3. **Methods, Networks, Projects to Create Bridges**
4. **General Conversation**

### 1. Being a Tour Guide Who Serves as a Bridge

Explore how to experience the "other" human in our eyes.  
 Put oneself in situations that other is experiencing, so we will understand better.  
 Imagine the life of the other by getting into one another's shoes.  
 Develop one's capacity for empathy.  
 Make the stones speak; everyone and everything has a story.  
 Guide tourists to experience things, places, and people in a personal way.  
 Build trust, remembering we are all one.  
 We live in the same region as neighbors forever, so we must get along.  
 Help tourists see life from the eye of a bird.  
 Reveal stories of beautiful, successful relationships of life side by side.  
 Remind travelers that not everything is crazy and pessimistic as told in news reports.  
 There are many sane people who want live and share their life in a kind way.  
 People, and thus conditions, can change.  
 Tour guides need to meet each other.  
 When I feel at home every where I take the group, it makes them feel at home, too.  
 When the tour group feels at home, the local hosts also feel comfortable.  
 Pray before every tour that I will be a bridge and bring understanding.  
 Shine light on exaggerated stereotypes by revealing new stories, people, and historical insights.  
 The way the guide listens and speaks to the group and people in the street affects what people learn about how to relate to the other.

### 2. Diverse Experiences — Places to Go, Speakers to Hear

#### Israeli Locations

[Bible Land Museum](#) — Jerusalem  
[Tower of David Museum](#) — Jerusalem  
 Meet Palestinian citizens of Israel  
 Meetings with Jews who arrived from Arab countries  
 Meet [Reuven Abergil](#) — Musrara  
 Meet [Neta Elkayam](#) — Singer  
 Visit [EcoME](#) — Dead Sea  
 Visit [Ali Abu Awad](#) — [Roots](#) organization  
 Visit [Ir Amim](#) — Jerusalem  
 Visit [Hadassah Froman](#) — Widow of Menachem Froman

#### Palestinian Locations

Visit refugee camps  
 Visit a Palestinian universities and talk with the students  
 Visit Jewish heritage sites in Bethlehem

Meet [Pastor Alex Awad](#) — Bethlehem

Visit Mundar Itak

Meet with [Sam Bahour](#)

Visit with [Mohammad Saba'aneh](#)

Communicate with [Green Olive Tours](#)

Create more experiences of building bridges in this land and all over the world.

### **3. Methods, Networks, Projects to Create Bridges**

Using sacred texts in our work is a door to talk about faiths and traditions of the different religions, not from a place of comparing rather an informative place that can bring inspiration and encourage deep thinking.

We can create curiosity in the tour group to help transcend resistance mechanisms tourists sometimes have to narratives of the "other." With curiosity, a broader discussion can be opened by the group's new will for learning and asking.

Consider marketing tours that are planned for a totally new audience who wish to better know one's own people, the "other," and the relationship. How can the "other" person's faith and life experience reflect something inside of me? Through this tour we will learn about the "other" and even more about ourselves, creating a bridge to each other.

### **4. General Conversation**

Today is not about any one way to guide. The aim is to create a greater, bigger toolbox for those of us who choose to serve as a bridge between humans.

Itamar : What is the place of holy scriptures in guiding? There is fear of creating rejection within the tour group. Perhaps using parallel teachings and narratives from the diverse religions would be strengthening and bridge-building.

Emily: There is a need to bring settlers to this conversations – not exclude them – and to hear "the other side" about both political views and human experiences.

Mohammad: It is of great value to meet as Israelis and Palestinian tour guides. We could also hike together.

Hadas: Yes this face-to-face meeting is so important.

Yahav: We Palestinians and Israelis can organize a tour together.

Elad: A tour in Jerusalem (or another place) would allow all of us to share our information about each location.

Adam: I can help with permits.



**CONTACTS:****Facilitator**

Elad Vazana  
Tour for Change  
+972-(0)54-249-7009  
Skype: eladvazana  
EladVazana@gmail.com  
<http://www.tour4change.com>  
<http://www.havayati.co.il>

**Host**

Goni Zilberman  
EcoME Center for Peace & Ecology  
GoniZil88@gmail.com  
<http://ecomecenter.org>  
<https://www.facebook.com/ecome15/>

**Arabic Translation and Interpretation**

Adam Nerk

