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My View

Finding home 6,000 miles from Cincinnati

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This op-ed is part of a series profiling the recent 2016 Cincinnati Congregation and Community Israel Mission. Funded in part by the Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati and organized by the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati, the 10-day trip included more than 500 people from nine different Cincinnati congregations, representing Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Humanistic movements of Judaism. It was the largest Israel mission in Cincinnati's history. This four-part series explores the transformative nature of the trip through the experiences of individual participants.

"It's complicated." That's the phrase a group of Rockdale Temple congregants wants to put in the middle of the State of Israel on a T-shirt, commemorating our recent trip.

Our congregation was one of nine different greater Cincinnati synagogues that traveled together in Israel from July 18 to July 27. For 10 days, we traversed the land of Israel in tandem aboard 15 buses under the hot Middle Eastern sun. Each group had their own unique experience, while also joining together several times — over 500 Cincinnatians strong — to celebrate our relationship with our homeland and with each other.

I had told our congregation that traveling to Israel is not a trip or a vacation. I knew that it would be a pilgrimage — an unprecedented one. Imagine a group of Baptists traveling on a faith mission with Catholics.

Our Cincinnati delegation was made up of congregations that represented Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and Humanistic movements of Judaism. We had among us an interfaith group and families who share different faiths. That spirit of pluralism, of recognizing and celebrating the many different ways to be Jewish, is so wonderfully unique to our Cincinnati Jewish community. And over the course of our trip, we would see that collaboration in action. We would realize just how powerful our big tent could be.

Our community gathered the second night of the mission in Netanya, Cincinnati's Israeli partner city, established through the Jewish Agency for Israel's Partnership2Gether program. We were joined by Netanyans we



Sigma Faye Coran is senior rabbi at Cincinnati's Rockdale Temple. She joined the temple in 2004, when she became the first female senior rabbi to serve a Cincinnati congregation.

know: those who have been Israeli emissaries in Cincinnati before they served in the Israeli army and others with whom we have built ongoing relationships through exchanges over the years. It was understood that our journey was about being together, sharing Cincinnati with Netanya even as Netanya has given to us. We have all been transformed by this relationship, which has been shepherded by the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati.

As we traveled, we held one another's hands as we climbed rocks in ancient ruins and stairs in sacred cities. We cried as we confronted history's darkest hours. We laughed as we slathered on Dead Sea mud. We explored our history, learning of our people's ability to adapt in the face of adversity, surviving as a religion with multiple faces. We were challenged by the complexity of living in a Jewish State, which strives to embrace our shared values of tolerance and democracy.

We explored the complexities together. On Saturday afternoon, about 350 members of our community stood to sing together in front of the Western Wall. We prayed for Israel and we came together to advocate for a Jewish state that supports diverse expressions of what it means to celebrate Judaism.

It's complicated. But as we sung HaTikvah (The Hope), Israel's national anthem, that Saturday afternoon, I began to hope that we could embrace the messiness; Jews of more types than you might be aware of along with so many people of other faiths who hold the land of Israel in their hearts.

Amid pilgrims from every inhabited continent, our Cincinnati community traveled together, supported by the Jewish Foundation of Cincinnati. We deepened our relationships on our journey. I found true awe in the conversations we shared along the way. Thousands of miles away from Cincinnati, our mission strengthened each of our congregations and our Jewish community at large to find, through complexity, something so

simple — home.