

Gardens and Graves

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I'm just back in Scotland after spending the summer in Jerusalem, which – forgive me for saying so – I find a more spiritual place than Glasgow! While I was there I spent a few days with friends in the north, in Tiberias and Haifa. I've always liked both these cities – both have very mixed populations, and the atmosphere seems much more relaxed than in Jerusalem, where everyone seems to be trying to prove something.

In Haifa, that's perhaps not so surprising, because the city has always had a mixed, and generally secular, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian population, and has also been the home of the Baha'i religion for almost 150 years, since its founder and his followers were driven out of Persia – Iran as we now know it – where their community is still severely persecuted. The city is dominated by the magnificent gardens and buildings of the Baha'i international headquarters on the slopes of the biblical Mount Carmel, and it sprawls round the bay towards the resting place of Baha'ullah in another superb garden shrine in the outskirts of the Crusader fort of Akko, once Napoleon's eastern base.

Tiberias, by contrast, was one of the cities that was never without a Jewish community, even when the Romans conquered ancient Israel, and destroyed Jerusalem and the biblical Temple, in the events that the Jewish calendar commemorates with days of fasting and lamentation. It is the burial place of some of the authors of the Talmud, as well as medieval rabbis who are revered to this day, and it is also the centre of a cluster of Christian pilgrimage sites around the Sea of Galilee.

And like Haifa, it is a beach resort at one corner of the so-called triangle in the lower Galilee that is home to the majority of Israel's 1.25 million Muslim Arab citizens. So, in the evenings, the beaches are aflame with makeshift barbecues, as orthodox Jews in their rather sombre attire picnic alongside Muslim women in colourful hijab. And it is also home to a remarkable Scottish institution.

In 1885, a Scottish surgeon, David Torrance, established a Church of Scotland mission that became the city's first hospital. The opening was attended by the local Chief Rabbi, the Mufti, and Catholic and Orthodox priests, and it was open to all without regard to race or creed. More recently, when its medical functions were taken over by the state, it became first a hostel for pilgrims, then a guest house, and most recently was redeveloped as an extremely successful hotel. Torrance's church is still there, but the hotel is now a favourite of secular Israelis, where some of my former Glaswegian friends from a nearby kibbutz organise regular ceilidhs and an annual Burns supper.

In this tolerant spirit of coexistence, when graves were found on the site during the redevelopment, the plans were changed in order to avoid offending religious sentiments by disturbing them. So it's ironic that one of the hot issues I found raging in Scotland on my return is about the reuse of graves, and not surprising that as a result Scottish politics is unusually attracting comment in the Israeli media, rather than the reverse.

Perhaps it's true after all that you can judge a society's attitude to the living by looking at how it respects its dead.