



Tantur: Hill in the Holy Land

Episode 4: Oasis

[NAT: Traffic]

[VO]

In episode 2, we talked about the Way of Hebron - Hebron road that is a six lane highway connecting Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It's built on top of the ancient road that connected the two locations.

Well, Hebron Road connects to a couple other less-famous roads, but still major in terms of their breadth. The point is, Tantur is at a literal crossroads of some really major highways. Traffic whips by below Tantur's hilltop in a way that would make Chicago commuters feel right at home.

And we've mentioned Tantur's proximity to key sites in the region. You're a 10-minute bus ride from the bustle of the Old City. A 10 minute walk from old town Bethlehem. And even closer still is the checkpoint, with its own kind of bustle.

But here's the thing...up on Tantur's hilltop...you can't hear any of that. Not only can you not hear it, but you have no idea it's that close.

I've worked with Tantur almost since I came to the University. A lot of the marketing materials in years past have used this term, "oasis," to describe Tantur. And when we talked to people about the place for this series, that term came up over and over again. And with good reason.

As we mentioned earlier, Tantur sits next to several key holy sites. And a number of them have to do with rest. The final

resting place of the matriarch Rachel is just next door. Mar Elias Monestary, where the prophet Elijah reportedly rested while fleeing Jezebel, is about a kilometer away. And then next to it there's the ruins of the Church of the Kathisma, the Seat of Mary, where early church fathers said the Blessed Virgin rested on her way to Bethlehem.

The traditional definition of an oasis is a place of rest. So, it's an apt descriptor for Tantur for a number of reasons. But the dictionary definition includes something else: a fertile place. A place where things can grow. As we wrapped up our time here, it became clear that in the case of Tantur, both apply...

I'm Andy Fuller, and you're listening to Tantur: Hill in the Holy Land.

[Schwake]

There is a clear distance between here and the outside. They can experience Jerusalem, they can experience Bethlehem, but they can come back to this place - an oasis, let's call it - with it's safety and security. They can study here, they can learn here they can build relationships in this community.

[VO]

Daniel Schwake is the executive director of the University of Notre Dame at Tantur. He's over the operations for both the Jerusalem Global Gateway and the Tantur Ecumenical Institute. It's a new role for Schwake and for the University, coming at a time when Notre Dame is looking to expand its presence here.

On our final day at Tantur, we walked around the grounds with Daniel, to get his take on the place and its position here, both literally and figuratively.

[Schwake]

When we talk about TEI, we need to remember that this is already an academic institution. So it's an institution of high education, it is run by the UND, run locally by a rector, but there has always been a very clear and strong academic link to the University. You have a senior ecumenical fellow, a member from the theology dept back on main campus that is involved here.

Now that we've introduced the JGG, I think there is a clearer link between what we've called ecumenism and theological

studies, and the faculty. We're kinda reinforcing that link back to the University.

Then I think we're reinforcing the link that goes beyond theology, beyond ecumenism. The students that come here - some of them are theology students, but they're not just theology students. So we're bringing in students that breathe in this unique atmosphere that we have here, and learn from the community that we have here.

This is Jerusalem. Maybe today we don't believe it's THE center of the world, but it's definitely A center of the world. Coming here, learning about the heritage, the religious factions and the political environment we have here - for our students to learn that and to live it, to experience it, is something that helps them capture, understand this part of the world and also helps them to understand a larger piece of the world itself.

Our students come here, we offer them courses here at Tantur, but we encourage them to go to both Bethlehem University and Hebrew University. By that our students are in position to learn both in the Palestinian side, and the Israeli side, on quite a deep level of interaction.

I think Palestine/Israel is fertile land when it comes to education. I think our students here have a lot to learn from our partners - our academic partners at the universities.

[VO]

To be sure, Notre Dame has used Tantur in the way Schwake describes for several decades. Now, the University is looking to build on that. Some of that looks like the program we covered in episode 2, when theology professor Avi Winitzer led students on an archaeological expedition at Tantur and another site in Israel. To understand more of what future faculty involvement could look like, we spoke to folks from Notre Dame International, including vice president for internationalization, Michael Pippenger. Here's a bit from that conversation.

[Pippenger]

We want to make sure that the entire university community and the wider ND family, understand that the University's presence in the Holy Land is something that is open to everyone. When the Inst was started, it was meant to be a research institute focused on the study of ecumenism. But now, as the Univ looks to become the great global Catholic univ of the 21st century, it's important for all of our colleges and schools and the faculty in those colleges and schools to understand that they can use the platform that we have in Jerusalem to do research.

I think it's important for our partners in the holy land to see that faculty are doing interesting research projects to promote the common good, and tackle challenges that people are facing in Jerusalem and around the world.

We're one of only 2 US universities to have a physical presence in Jerusalem, and to be able to be in the heart of a whole series of conversations and dialogues, and challenges and opportunities, is something that's unique for our faculty and unique for our students and we are very grateful to be there. And to that end, we've wanted to grow our presence, grow our identity, so people know that the Tantur Ec Inst is there and continues to thrive and flourish, but so too do our faculty and students in a whole host of other ways that we hope will attract more people to learn about ND and want to be involved with us.

The future is very bright for the Univ in Jerusalem. We've had a series of conversations with the deans of various colleges and schools and asked them to imagine what kinds of new initiatives make the most sense for us to house on site for our faculty and students. And so in doing that, we've canvased them about doing research projects that are particularly important to our mission as a university, and we'll be growing those programs out.

[Kaufman]

I've been doing this since 2006: Using Tantur as a base, to do research in the region.

[VO]

One Notre Dame faculty member already using Tantur is Asher Kaufman, the director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. We spoke with him as he was finishing up his summer of work at Tantur.

We send students to different parts of the world to conflict zones, post-conflict zones, to study in peace organizations. To work, learn, and integrating studies in theory with real-life experience.

You know, studying peace you have to start with studying conflict, root causes of conflict, and how to transform root causes of conflict. And this is at least half of what we do at the Kroc Institute. So when you look at our students, they study peace, and their degree is in peace studies, but they study from the perspective of how to understand conflict and how to transform conflict.

Tantur has been a very good space for them to be in - it's a safe zone, it's an opportunity for them to spend a day in

Bethlehem or Ramallah, or East Jerusalem. And then they come here and...you can decompress here. It's really unique, this place.

[VO]

There it is again. A place to decompress. Relax. Rest. An oasis.

It's part of the evolving mission of Tantur, as I see it. You can see - throughout the 1990s, during what we call the peace decade, Tantur was used by peace organizations Israeli-Palestinian organizations as a hub. The place was bustling with activity...we used the location as a space to meet to have events, have conferences. It was geographically a convenient place because you could come from Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and both Palestinians and Israelis considered the space neutral. So I see Kroc's work and MA students as a continuation of that tradition.

The place is a neutral place for peace activism. It has become more of a challenge because of the wall - Israel started constructing it 2002, done by 5-6, so you can no longer just go back and forth. You used to be able to do that. Still, most Palestinians consider this space neutral, and it is accessible for Palestinians. And it is still seen by peace activists and there aren't many spaces in Israel-controlled territory that are considered neutral.

If you come here, you will not be harassed by Israeli authorities, you will not be challenged by Palestinian resistance. The conflict has become so complex and intense where there are very few spaces where this neutrality still exists, and this is one of the spaces.

[VO]

Fr. Ted Hesburgh, whose work to establish Tantur we covered in episode 1, also established the Kroc Institute. Peace was his passion. In an interview in 2009, he said his hope was for people to walk through the doors of Tantur, and ask what they could do to bring about peace.

You've already met one peace studies student, Emilia McManus, who we followed in episode 3.

I think the word that people use to describe Tantur is an oasis. And it is - the grass is well-manicured, there's fountains, the people are beyond friendly, couldn't be more welcoming.

It has a very rich place in understanding Christian unity.

So it was cool to be there as a studying theologian and get to be in a space that is

But it's also perched upon a hill that looks down into Bethlehem, right past the security wall. That's tough because now you feel the tension of being in a beautiful space, but being reminded that this is contested territory. 10.45 And while we're in a space that represents unity for Christians, we're in a place where there is still strife, there's still a lot of instability.

Educationally it was very impactful as a polisci peace studies student. These types of trips are really important because you can study in a book, but you don't really have the experiential time that is very valuable.

The need for empathy, the need for understanding, and also the value in being a learner and a listener first, rather than always being the one who's talking.

Which, when applied to theological discussion...sounds an awful lot like why Tantur was founded in the first place...

[Phone ring: Is this Kristin?]

[VO]

Kristin Colberg studied at Tantur as a Notre Dame undergrad in the 90s. She's now on staff at St. John's university in Minnesota.

Do you remember what it was like getting dropped off there for the first time?

You kinda get to to Tantur, and you're tired, and Tantur has that reception area at the front and I just remember greeting us and talking to us, and my friend said let's go out into the city and see something. 12.58 And my first reaction was, I'm so tired I can't even imagine. But we did because it was so exciting and you're in this place that has that palpable history to it that is just totally unlike...nothing in the US can compare.

Even though the ground around me feels like it's shifting because this place is so different, I feel like this place is going to let me explore.

When I went there last year, as soon as someone heard someone had been there before, even if it was 20 years before, they all wanted to see how you were doing, "I was here when you were here!" Once you've been there, you're a part of the community.

You can't just learn something from afar, because you need to hear the story from someone who's living it, and maybe not from the dominant narrative of how the story generally gets told.

[VO]

Kristin was appointed by the Vatican to be on the council for the international dialogue between the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church. And she credits her time at Tantur for being the pivot point in her career path.

And that's the other thing that an oasis does. It provides fertile land. Fr. Russ, the Tantur rector, put this better than I can.

Tantur is a place that has brought scholars and students and committed lay people and clergy from all different parts of the world. And by sending its own students here, by having ND faculty come here for their own research, they have engaged with all of those people who've come from different parts of the world.

I think ultimately here at Tantur, we're always about planting seeds. Some of which we see come to fruition, and some of them we may not see for generations. And we trust that somehow the Lord will bring that to fruition in his own good time.

That image of an oasis is one that people turn to frequently. And I think that is pretty accurate. It's not only because of the beauty of our grounds, although that's certainly part of it. People will come back from their experiences of going out and engaging with the local communities and they come back to a space that is peaceful even though now we're at the center of a lot of urban development. People are able to reflect a bit about what they've experienced and a bit about what it's calling for from them. Because I think that's important. 29.30 People come to this place and leave feeling as if they've been changed in some way. And it takes a while to figure out I think in what ways specifically God might be calling them to act.

[McManus]

I've been privileged in my life to travel, through ND, through my family. I've never visited somewhere that really did capture my heart. I felt a connection and a need to come back.

[VO]

As we packed up to head back to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, we felt something similar. As Father Ted said back in the 90s, Jerusalem is a place that grabs your heart. He's entirely correct. And part of the reason for this series was to communicate some of that. I can guarantee we didn't do it

justice, because words can't describe it well enough. And even the stories we've published in this series on ND.edu, with all their imagery and words and video and graphics...well, they don't tell enough of the story either.

But there's a bit of comfort knowing that part of the reason we can't get to the whole story...is that the story is still being told. That's why it makes sense to be here, on this Hill in the Holy Land, in this most important part of the world, as that story is unfolding.

Tantur: Hill in the Holy Land is produced by the Office of Public Affairs and Communications.