

Hiking the Holy Lands

How a Spiritual Crisis Led One Hiker to Where It All Began

By Becky Kivlovitz

I hiked the Middle East. Alone. At age 20.

We barefoot danced in the light of the campfire as drums and harmonicas emerged from packs. Grass squished in our toes as we held hands, twirled, laughed, and sank, exhausted, into conversation. The poyke—a large cauldron full of veggies, meat, and beer—simmered as new hikers joined. Freshly picked cherries from the kibbutz stained our lips and hands a deep red. The full moon lit the trickling Hasbani River and the warm breeze carried our song into the mountains of the Israeli north: I was going to be okay.

Getting “removed” from leading a youth ministry struck deep. I worked for years with the same group of girls, leading bible studies, adventures, and service projects. And then that time of my life was gone.

Background: My atheist Jewish father married my nonreligious mother but, in a near death bout with cancer, my mom became a born again Christian. My parents, subsequently, divorced. My dad said my cross necklace reminded him of crusaders and the Holocaust.

But Christianity was great. My life was service, adventure hikes into God’s creation, freedom from abuse and addictions, and a loving community. But Hell for the unsaved? Eternal suffering for my dad, brothers, Jewish family, and 68 percent of the world’s population? And what about other faiths? What made Christianity exclusively right? I spoke my Christian doubts to the ministry director, and after a few more meetings she suggested I step down from my position. I felt like I lost custody of my children. And my faith.

What would Jesus do?

I impulsively set out to trek across Israel, Jesus style. The whole first century package: I packed only what I could carry, including a book to record my travel parables, and I’d need to find a place to rest my head each night. I wanted the Jesus who tore up the Middle East, turning tables on materialism and legalism as he preached love, and I would hike those same deserts, mountains, and valleys on sections of the 620-mile Israel National Trail in the footsteps of my backpacking forefathers, exploring their words with my feet.

“By yourself?” My mom was concerned. “Go for it,” my dad was thrilled.

I started north at Kibbutz Yiron, and I immediately learned that the freedom and adventure I loved in Christianity wasn’t exclusive to Christianity. I splashed in waterfalls, explored secret caves, and set camp riverside before nightfall. Marked with white, blue, and orange stripes, the Israel National Trail traverses the snowcapped mountains of the north, the volcanic flats of the Golan, the hills of the Galilee, the beaches of the Mediterranean, the Negev Desert’s Sahara-like sand dunes, the African savannah in the Arava Valley, and southern Eilat with its granite mountains and Red Sea.



And there is no shortage of ancient ruins. As we approached a crumbling crusade watchtower, I asked Maoz, an Israeli hiker, what he thought about Jesus. “Jesus hung with Jewish people, pagan people, roman people,” he answered. “He met all those people and he learned from them. He sometimes taught them his lessons. We are all human beings. We want to live together and create a better world.”

I later asked Tomar, a bearded Jesus-looking Israeli hiker, why humans even exist in the first place: “God, love, and foodsex,” he answered. “Foodsex?” I asked. He winked. I read my Bible less and listened to stories of people more.

Farther down the trail, hiker Eyal shimmied up a tree to collect twigs for a fire to make hot tea with fresh herbs on a hike break. As we ate dried fruit and waited for the water to boil, Eyal explained his love for the trail: “It’s you, the skies, and God. You can’t run away from yourself. You meet yourself in a different condition, not in the regular way where you sleep in a bed, watch TV, and use the toilet. Because in nature, we are not ego, not fighting. No property and money. No, we are sitting here and we drink tea. There’s no money that you steal from me and I steal from you, and there is enough property for both of us.” He continued, “Out here, you think of many questions you never ask yourself. Where will I go?” These men reminded me of Jesus.

I felt peace as I plunged into the cool, swampy Sea of Galilee to rinse off the day’s dirt—walking on water isn’t for everyone. And as my clothes dried, I lay outside in the warm night breeze, pondering under the stars. I knew then why Jesus, Moses, and Elijah headed to the Israeli wild to listen for God’s voice. I didn’t hear a voice, but I learned to love my questions and the mystery of it all.

I used to think I could solve the Middle Eastern conflict if I could get everyone to believe in Jesus, but now I just wanted everyone out on the trail, dancing around a pot of poyke, and starlight reflecting. I think Jesus would approve.

I found goodness in the infinite deserts, the golden fields, floating in the Dead Sea at midnight, and watching the vibrant corals sway in the Red Sea. I found goodness watching religious pilgrims desperately kiss the floors and walls of their religious histories. I found goodness in the kindness of both Jewish and Arab strangers. I found goodness in walking, laughing, crying, dancing, drinking, and eating with hikers of the world and its faiths. And I never did return to ministry. The ways of God are unsearchable and we have the world before us. We’ll love the good, fight the bad, and foodsex?

Find online extras about the Israel National Trail and hiking solo at womensadventuremagazine.com.