



At the Western Wall - The Bar Mitzvah program. Photography: courtesy of Lotem Association

# AN ACCESSIBLE TOUR OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Vered Sabag

Imagine the following situation - a group of 30 hikers, noise and commotion, crowds of people trying to pass through a narrow alley in the market, smells of spices and food from nearby restaurants, and an occasional ear-splitting deafening call of the muezzin. Two armed policemen on horseback are trying to pass through the crowd, checking the surroundings, and from above, the walls of the Old City framing the occurrence. Now imagine a group with communication disabilities, young people on the spectrum of autism, who went on a day tour with a guide and found themselves in that same situation.

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**Vered Sabag**, Vice President of Education at Lotem Association and director of the Nagish Lehakir association center. Vered has extensive experience in planning and leading trips for groups of people with disabilities. In addition, she has in recent years been involved in the development of accessible contents for heritage sites, museums and tourist sites in general, as well as in conducting seminars and study-days on service and content accessibility.

Sounds like a lost case in advance, doesn't it?

Indeed, guiding in the Old City is a very challenging "event", even for a group without disabilities. But guiding a group with a disability in these complex conditions can end up being an unpleasant experience, if not done in a tailored and accessible way.

Lotem association, engaging in guiding people with disabilities for 27 years, has been conducting accessible tours around the country in general, and in Jerusalem and the Old City in particular. Over the years, the association's staff has gained a great deal of experience in building hiking trails, coordinating the accessible sites and mainly in guiding the actual tour.

Beyond all the complexities we have already described, there are the complex physical characteristics of the terrain (slopes, very uncomfortable interlocking stone to move on, narrow passages). And let's not forget the story, yes, the story of this special place because the content we want to convey to the group is in itself a complex story - many characters, transition between periods, changes of government, different religions and what not???

So, how does one do that anyway? How does one create accessible tours with accessible guidance that allow for a fun and instructive normative hiking experience also for people with disabilities?

The purpose of this article is to give some examples of tours that are accessible to travelers with different disabilities, with reference to the technical and content characteristics that are worth paying attention and referring to when planning a tour.

## **An accessible tour for wheelchair users**

There is no doubt that the Old City of Jerusalem, and ancient cities in general, are no small challenge for travelers in wheelchairs. Nevertheless, our Old City, having undergone an impressive accessibility program in recent years, may offer an interesting and experiential tasting to such travelers as well.

Let's begin by saying that a year ago, the "Jerusalem Accessibility" app was launched. This is a wonderful app that allows you to get information about the accessible corners of the Old City and plan a customized and convenient tour of it.

## **So where are we going? And what do we talk about?**

Raz, one of our guides, a guy who gets around in an electric wheelchair and aided by a respirator, went out with us to roam around in the Old City and see "what else can be done there ..." We chose to walk on an accessible and convenient route in the Old City - from the quarter's parking to Batei Mahase (Shelter houses) square, to the Burnt House, the Cardo and back to the quarter's parking. Finally, we "jumped" with the vehicle to the Western Wall plaza.

It was clear to us that this axis would constitute a significant taste of the Old City contents for the average tourist. We also knew that we were facing some challenges along the way:

- The paving stones in the Old City are bouncy and unpleasant, to say the least, and in some cases a push of the wheelchair by an attendant is required.
- There is a high density of travelers on this route.
- There are unique points of interest on our way, which cannot be reached with a wheelchair.

We began our way in the quarter parking lot (the place has a number of parking spaces for the disabled). We found (not easily) a comfortable corner to say a few words about the Old City. In order to fully understand the space in which we will wander around, we brought with us a portable model of the Old City and its walls that allows us to better understand its structure, the thickness of the walls, and the walking route in which we will walk. We also brought with us the city's timeline - a large board with the period bar and next to each period an illustration of a typical figure and a significant event that characterizes the period, just to allow a little order in the city's complicated timeline.

We advanced a little on Chabad Street and immediately turned onto HaHatzozrot (Trumpets) Street and at its end we turned left again to Gilad Street. We passed the Rothschild House on our right and immediately after it, we turned right and continued up to the Batei Mahase (Shelter houses) Square. We told the special story of the neighborhood with the help of a collection of pictures from the old days to this day. We made sure to use enlarged pictures (these pictures help see the aid accessory even in the case of groups, for those who have difficulty seeing and for those who sit further away from the guide). We ended with an inscription engraved on one of the walls of the square: "Old men and women will still be sitting in Jerusalem ... and the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets".

From there, the road led us straight to a left turn to Misgav Ladach Street. Shortly afterwards, we reached the top of the stairs leading down to the Western Wall. We knew this point was not passable for wheelchairs but we did not want to miss the experience, so we sent one of our guides, equipped with a cell phone with a camera down the stairs. While walking, he made sure to photograph the experience of descending to the Western Wall and the view from the observation deck on the Western Wall. This way we could prepare Raz for the expected surprise when we reach the Western Wall from the direction of the Dung Gate. Immediately after the stairs we turned left towards the Burnt House and went in to visit the site. The uniqueness of the Burnt House is that it shows one of the affluent dwellings from the days of the Second Temple, before the destruction. Impressive archeological remains are on display, which can be seen up close. In terms of wheelchair accessibility - you can get to the central points of interest on the site and experience its story well. A large part of the exhibits is positioned in a way that allows a convenient point of view even for a person sitting in a wheelchair. At the end of the tour we continued on our way to the ruins of the Hurva Synagogue, where we told the special story of the synagogue using enlarged pictures from the days before the restoration as well as from the days when it was active before its destruction. From there we continued straight up to Hayehudim [Jews] Street and reached the lookout point over the open Cardo. The descent to the Cardo from this corner is not accessible so we chose to stop at the nearby seating area and describe the lifestyle at the Cardo during the Roman-Byzantine period. We brought with us a short video describing the Cardo today as well as an image depicting the appearance of the place in those days, the bustling life, the dress of the people and the discourse that took place on site. At the end of the explanations, we continued a little further along the Hayehudim Street to the HaShalsholet Street (the market area), where we took a "U-turn" and entered the indoor market. It was a great opportunity to explore Cardo in its accessible parts. We enjoyed the murals on site and reached up to the Madaba Map, with the help

of which we could once again describe the view of the city of Jerusalem during those days. From there we returned to Hayehudim street and the Cardo lookout point, and continued straight until we returned to the Quarter's parking where we began the tour.

Reaching the Western Wall for people in wheelchairs is only possible safely by car, so we got on the vehicles and reached the Dung Gate. We entered the plaza with the vehicle (special permission must be requested in advance) and from there we continued with great excitement to the Western Wall plaza. To our delight, the plaza allows visitors in wheelchairs from all over the world to reach the holy place and pray adjacent to the Western Wall itself.

Finally, we continued to the virtual reality display - "A Look into the Past", which belongs to the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. The display makes it possible to understand what the Temple and the Western Wall plaza looked like 2,000 years ago. To reach the exhibit, one has to stand in front of the toilets in the Western Wall plaza and turn right according to the signs. From there we returned to the vehicle, exhausted but satisfied.

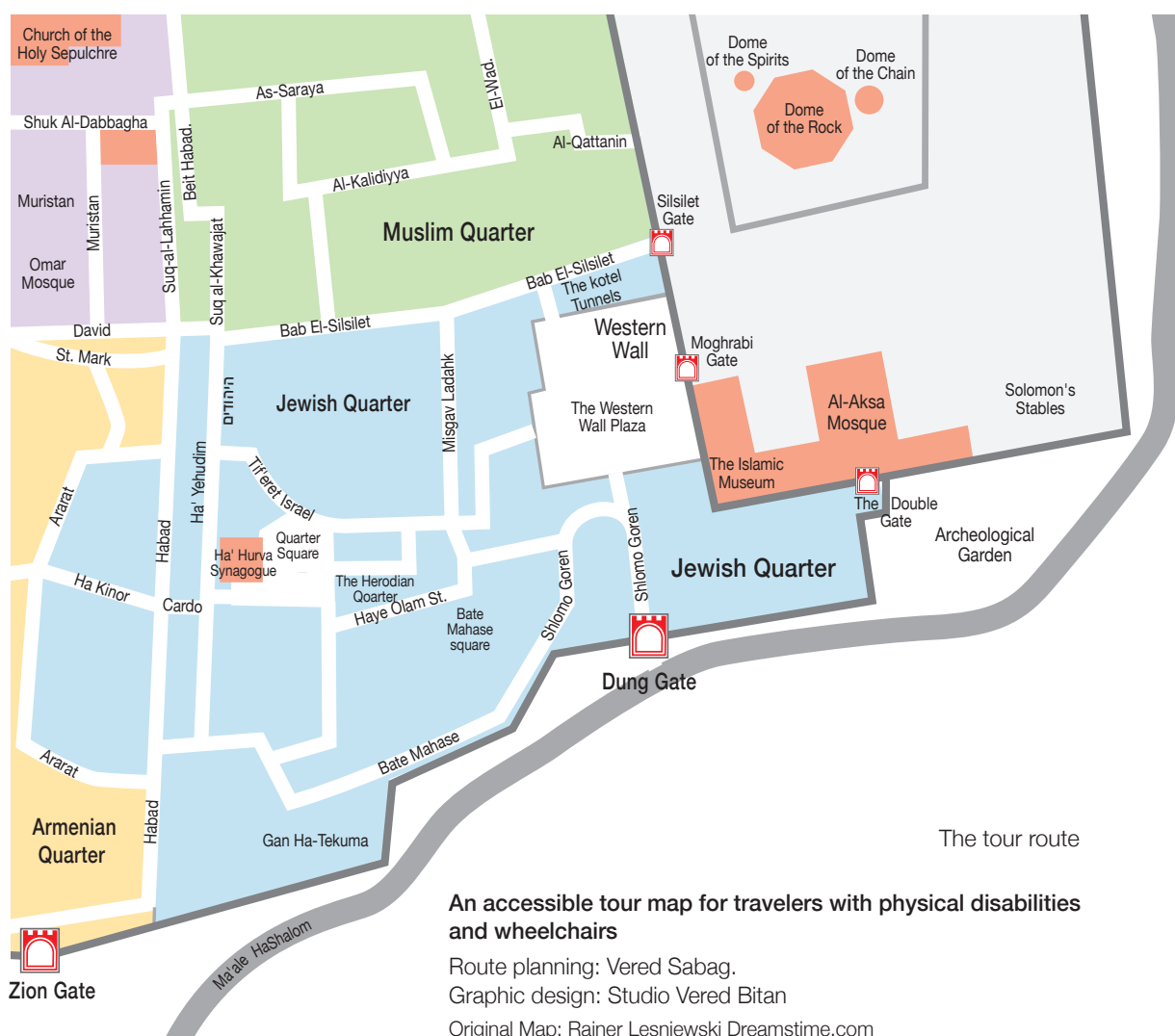
At the end of the tour the excitement was great. For Raz, who as a young child was privileged to visit the place, returning to the Old City as an adult in a wheelchair, was powerful and shaking. The tour to places with a "childhood scent" reminded him that he has the ability to reach important and unique sites for him, his country and his people.

### **Some important things to know about getting around with wheelchairs in the Old City**

- It is possible to descend with the shuttle - from the upper parking lot in the Jewish Quarter to the Western Wall. This is true for up to two wheelchairs at a time.
- It is possible to reach the Western Wall plaza not through the Jewish Quarter and obtain a special permit to enter the Western Wall plaza by bus, which makes it easier to ascend and descend.
- Do not be tempted to walk from the Quarter parking lot to the Dung Gate. The passage through this road involves walking on a steep and dangerous road.







## Technical details worth knowing:

- Toilets – there are accessible toilets near the northern exit from the Cardo, next to the Burnt House as well as at the Western Wall plaza.
- Reasonable places for groups with wheelchairs to stop are in the area of the Hurva Synagogue, near the Cardo Observation point and in the area of Batei Mahase (Shelter houses) area.
- Options of accessible adds-on for independent travelers (less for groups).
- Davidson Center - The entrance and exhibition space (a museum that includes videos about pilgrimages and archeological findings from the Second Temple). The entrance to the center involves a wheelchair lift, not from the main entrance.
- Western Wall Tunnels - It is possible to reach a certain point in the tunnels. It is important to know that entry involves a descent in two lifts. In light of this, it is mandatory to coordinate your arrival. In addition, the visit is not recommended for groups with more than two wheelchairs.

## An accessible tour for travelers with visual impairments

Try to imagine yourselves closing your eyes and going on a tour of the Old City ... What would your sense of hearing perceive? What could you touch to get to know the environment? In which places would or wouldn't you have difficulty? For us, guiding travelers with visual impairments in the Old City is a real experience. All the senses come to life in an increased manner. Everything is very much alive there - the smells, the sounds, the colors, the movement of the people. Even the "stones with a human heart", which can be touched can teach us about the different periods ... In light of all this, we went on a trip to the Old City with a group of adults with visual impairments. We began a trip that is all a sensory experience that allows to get to know the richness and great variety of the place.

We chose to go on a trip that included entrance to the Tower of David, a visit to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a walk along the Via Dolorosa and the spice market and ending at the Western Wall tunnels and the Western Wall.

We dropped the participants off at the Mamilla area and gathered in a quiet corner to open the guidance (at the exit from Mamilla to the Jaffa Gate there is a semi-amphitheater where you can sit with a group and make an orderly opening). We distributed audio headphones to each participant. In the case of guiding a group with visual impairments, the use of audio headphones is very important. This way, everyone had the opportunity to hear us throughout the tour guidance and the guide had the opportunity to provide a visual description while walking (a visual description is a description of our environment as objectively and accurately as possible in order to allow the visually impaired participant to experience and understand his/her surroundings).

We began the tour at the Tower of David. The place has a number of great models depicting the Old City during different periods. We tried, through the models and replicas on site, to describe the structure of the old city, the different gates and quarters as well as the route we were about to take. We entered the displays that allow touching in some of the exhibits.



Tower of David Museum. © Guter | Dreamstime.com

In the Shivat Zion (Return to Zion) room and in the Roman-Byzantine period room, it is possible to touch various models, replicas and exhibits, which allows for further study of the characteristics of the period. In addition - in the courtyard of the citadel there are exhibits from the Crusader period. We brought with us an illustration of the sounds that characterized the days when the citadel was in use: sounds of war, dialogue between rulers, galloping horses and chariots moving through the streets.

At the end of the tour of the Tower of David, we returned to the Jaffa Gate again and dealt with the physical structure of the gate - we explained how the side of the gate was closed and why it was built angularly and not straight. We mentioned that this was how the ancient cities were built in the past – thick walls, large angular gates, narrow streets and adjoining houses.

We continued on David street through alleys bustling with shops and peddlers until we came to a junction with Muristan Street, where we turned left. We advanced until we reached the Church of the Redeemer. During the walk we made sure to provide a visual description of what was around us. It is important to note that in this type of visual description there is no need to use judgmental words - beautiful, ugly, pleasant ... the visual description should be made while actually describing what you see - the crowded stands, the people's clothing, the various goods sold, and more.

Before entering the Church, we felt with our hands the impressive front door and the special opening. For a start, we went up to the delightful lookout point on site. We climbed up spiral stairs with extra caution, but the view from above was worth the effort! Some may ask - what does a person with a visual impairment have to do in an observation point? But even such an audience can find great interest in looking from above (especially when most visually impaired people are not completely blind), enjoy the wind and hear the sounds of the Old City from a new direction. We made the observation clockwise - from 12 o'clock and back to it, and at every hour where there was a relevant or interesting structure, we indicated the hour, described its characteristics, its appearance and its importance. We linked our words to the models we saw at the beginning of the day and allowed to touch on the model we brought with us, which depicts the Old City today. We made sure to remember that our job was to be the eyes of the traveler, so we had to give an accurate and in-depth description, but not to the point of boredom... During the observation time, we also referred to the various sounds rising from the city: the sounds of the muezzin, prayers playing in the ears, the ringing of bells from the churches scattered in the space around us. All of these can help make the experience multi-sensory and powerful, even for a person who sees nothing in the observation point.

At the end of the observation we entered the church itself and told its story. We touched together the large stone pillars and the elegant seats. We described the structure which is almost completely clean of illustrations and ornaments, unlike many other churches.

As we left the church we turned left and immediately reached the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We did not enter the church but described its appearance from the outside, we allowed to touch the entrance gate and told its story. From there, we continued our way on the Via Dolorosa, the last way of Christ. During the walk, we described the different stations on this way and stopped at the relevant places. When we reached the junction with HaGai Street, we turned right and



entered another market where the smells of spices accompanied us on our way. We continued straight until the Western Wall tunnels were to our left. We decided to go inside. The tunnel site is great because it allows contact with the stones and gives a wonderful feeling of a tunnel and of walking underground - moisture, coolness and silence. However, it is important to remember that the very act of entering a dark place, for a visually impaired person, makes him completely blind. In light of this, good preparation was required for what awaited us below, attaching additional attendants or walking in a line, in a way that gives confidence to those who need it.

In the Western Wall tunnels, we gathered around the magnificent model of the Temple Mount and the Temple located near the entrance. This model is tactile and therefore was an important tool for us. In addition, we chose to enter the prayer area at the place, gave time to feel the holy books and vessels and even sang a prayer song (without disturbing the worshipers at the place). We then continued towards the Little Western Wall, where we felt the huge size of one of the stones. This was a wonderful way to understand the manner of construction and its complexity in ancient times.



The Western Wall Tunnels. © Lev Tsimbler | Dreamstime.com

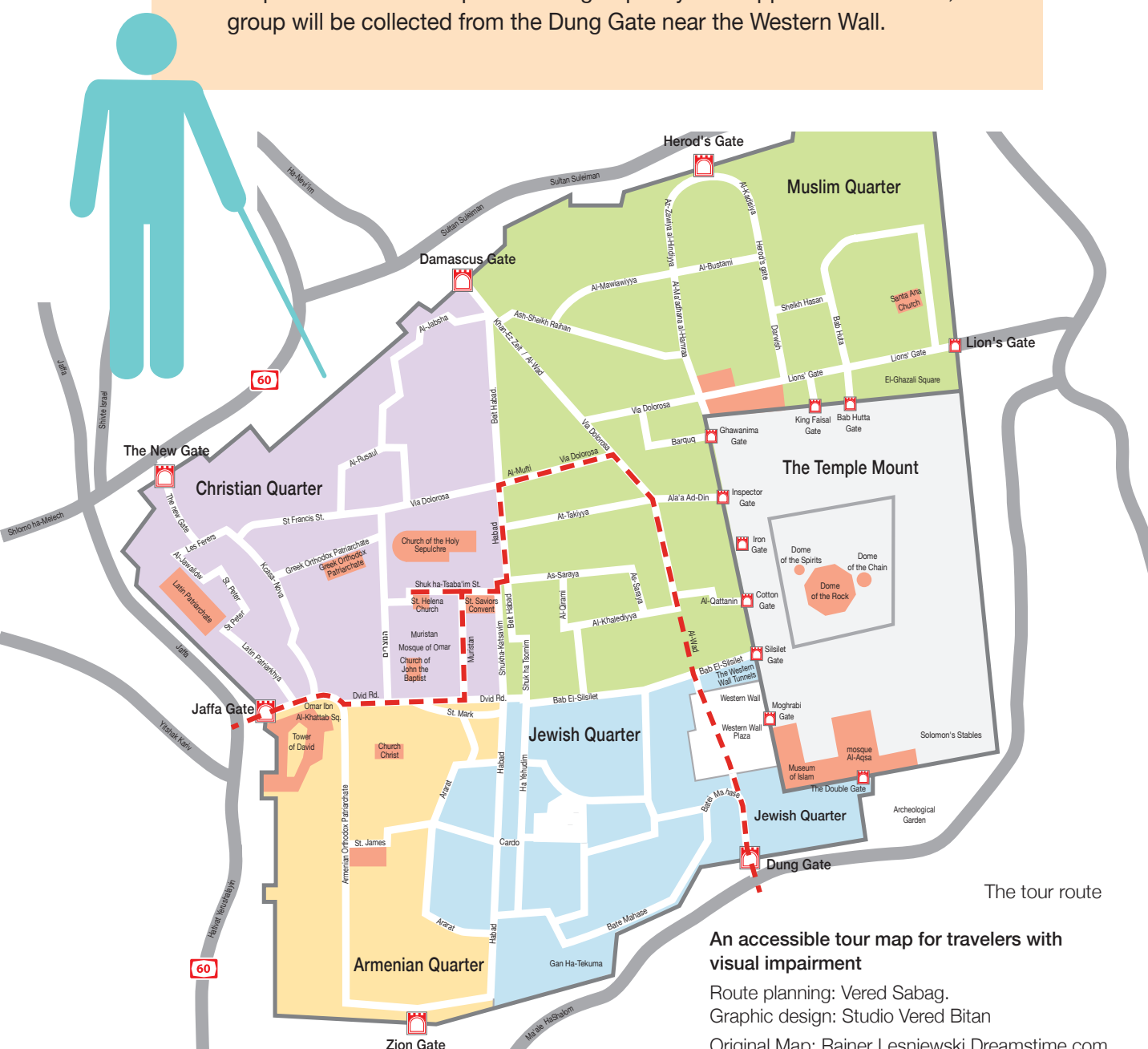
As we exited the tunnels, we played the song “Jerusalem of Gold” and we walked together towards the Western Wall plaza. When we arrived, we described the sight we saw, the plaza, the Western Wall, the Temple Mount and more ... At the end of the explanation, we allowed some prayer time and an independent visit to the place.

In the tour summary, the participants talked about the possibility of experiencing a tour of the Old City as any person, about the ability to understand the components of the place, the story behind the stones and the complicated historical sequence that accompanied the place. For some of the participants, this was their first visit to the Old City and for a few of them - a first visit to the Western Wall. The great excitement with which they described the experience for them was worth all the effort in planning and adjusting the tour.



## Technical details worth knowing

- Entrance to the Church of the Redeemer during prayer hours is not possible. Make sure in advance during what hours you should get to the place.
- The visit to the Tower of David and the Western Wall Tunnels - involves a fee. The visit must be arranged in advance. Tours of the Western Wall Tunnels - must be coordinated well in advance due to the many visitors to the site.
- Toilets can be found near the Jaffa Gate, the Tower of David, near the Cardo and the Western Wall plaza.
- It is important to be careful and check that all participants are present and ask the additional attendants to keep an eye out since the site is highly crowded.
- Drop-off and collection points - the group may be dropped off at Mamilla, the group will be collected from the Dung Gate near the Western Wall.



**An accessible tour map for travelers with visual impairment**

Route planning: Vered Sabag.

Graphic design: Studio Vered Bitan

Original Map: Rainer Lesniewski Dreamstime.com

# An accessible tour for travelers with cognitive disabilities of mild to moderate functioning

If we have so far described populations with which the tour is a little more complicated, here we find a fascinating and special challenge. Going on a tour with travelers with cognitive disabilities requires a lot of forethought. Apart from choosing the route in which we will go, a great deal of time must also be devoted to the content we choose to convey.

Many times we have already led such visitors to the Old City. Each time anew a lot of thinking and preparation was required of us. Nevertheless, these tours mostly ended with an uplifting feeling of learning, experience, excitement and joy.

The preparations included, among other things, the choice of information and content that we will deal with. We have tried to remember that a lot of information, which is not organized and is not related to the daily lives of the travelers is a complex thing to understand and often irrelevant.

In light of this, we chose the tour to be on the subject of religions and get to know through them the various figures in the city today. To make the tour more vivid and clear, we tried to lead the tour through the story of different characters, each of whom represents a different religion.



© Jose Hernandez | Dreamstime.com

We met at the Damascus Gate and held a short opening. We brought with us different hats - Keffiyeh, Kippah, Skufia (a type of hat or cap of the ranks of the clergy in Orthodox Christianity)

After telling a little about the city of Jerusalem and its uniqueness, we explained that today we were going to meet different figures living in the Old City, and that each of them would tell us its special story: what it believes in, what are the important symbols for it, what is the holy day of the week and more... We explained that everyone is connected to the holy city of Jerusalem and that together we will try to understand why. Before we left, we distributed a "Road Bingo" - cards with illustrations of various motifs that we will meet along the way - symbols, accessories, clothing, voices and more... We asked the participants to mark X on squares illustrating things they saw along the way.

We set off and began advancing on Beit Habad street. We touched the large stones and tried to understand whether they were new or old, whether they were similar to the stones of the houses in which we live. We looked at the large openings and the narrow alleys and mostly looked at the people - how they were dressed, what they held in their hand.

On the way we met various stations of the Via Dolorosa and presented a picture of a Christian clergyman. We tried together to locate such a person with our eyes and at the same time we used the "Christian pouch" - a small cloth bag from which we pulled out various elements that represent the religion - A cross bearing the image of Jesus, a small model of a church, a representative hat, the New Testament and more. With the help of the items we spoke a little about Christianity: Where it come from, who is its clergyman, what is the Via Dolorosa (briefly) and how is the New Testament different from the Bible.

We made our way and reached the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We went into it and tried to characterize it - what forms it has, where the clergyman stands, what voices are heard in it, what the bells and organs are used for and how the prayer sounds in the place.

We left the church and reached Muristan Square and from there the Arab market. Prior to entering the market, we took great care to ensure safety and to prepare the travelers for the overcrowding and bustle of the place. We scattered the staff among the participants and asked everyone to see what was sold in the market and what language they spoke.

When we got out of the market, we gathered the group and listened to the experiences. The excitement was great. There were those who were apprehensive and just wanted to get out of there, and there were those who enjoyed the experience immensely. We linked the market to Muslims and showed a picture of a Muslim cleric. We took out the "pouch of Islam" and through the motifs that were in it - the Koran, a rosary, a kaffiyeh, a turban and a crescent - we told the story of the religion of Islam and its main motifs. We were lucky to also hear the muezzin calling when we left.

From there we continued to the rooftop lookout - this corner, located right on the border between the Arab market and the Jewish Quarter, is a great spot to look at the Old City from above and to distinguish between the various religious buildings. Together we tried to identify the mosques, churches and synagogues. We counted how many there were of each of them and discovered that they all lived here together - Muslims, Christians and Jews.





The Hurva Synagogue. © Asafta | Dreamstime.com

And if we are talking about Jews - we have reached a stage where our tour reached the Hurva Synagogue. Inside the synagogue there is local guidance that allows you to get to know the special story of the place but also to hear about the different motifs that it has.

Here, too, we pulled out our “Jewish small bag” and took out, as if from a ‘magic hat’, a head covering and a Kippah [yarmulke], a Star of David and a Bible. We listened to the voices on site - the quiet voices of prayer. Through these motifs, we also spoke this time about the characteristics of Judaism, the synagogue as a place of prayer and the connection between the Western Wall and the synagogues today.

We walked together to the lookout of the Western Wall and there we tried to observe the people who reached the place - what are they doing? How are they dressed?

When we got to the plaza, we took out again all the elements that were in the bags and tried to sort them out - understand what belongs to whom and remember again the characters we met on the tour. We looked at the bingo pages the participants filled out along the way and saw the human diversity and abundance of details that exist in such a small area.

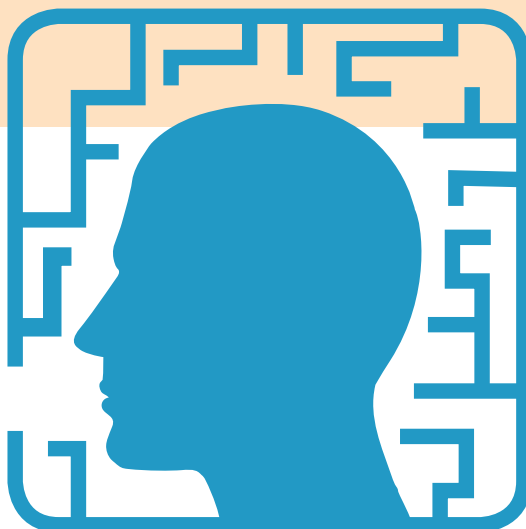
We summed up by saying that the Old City is sacred to all religions, we repeated the reasons for this and together we hoped that the Old City and the Western Wall will always be open to anyone who wants to come and pray.

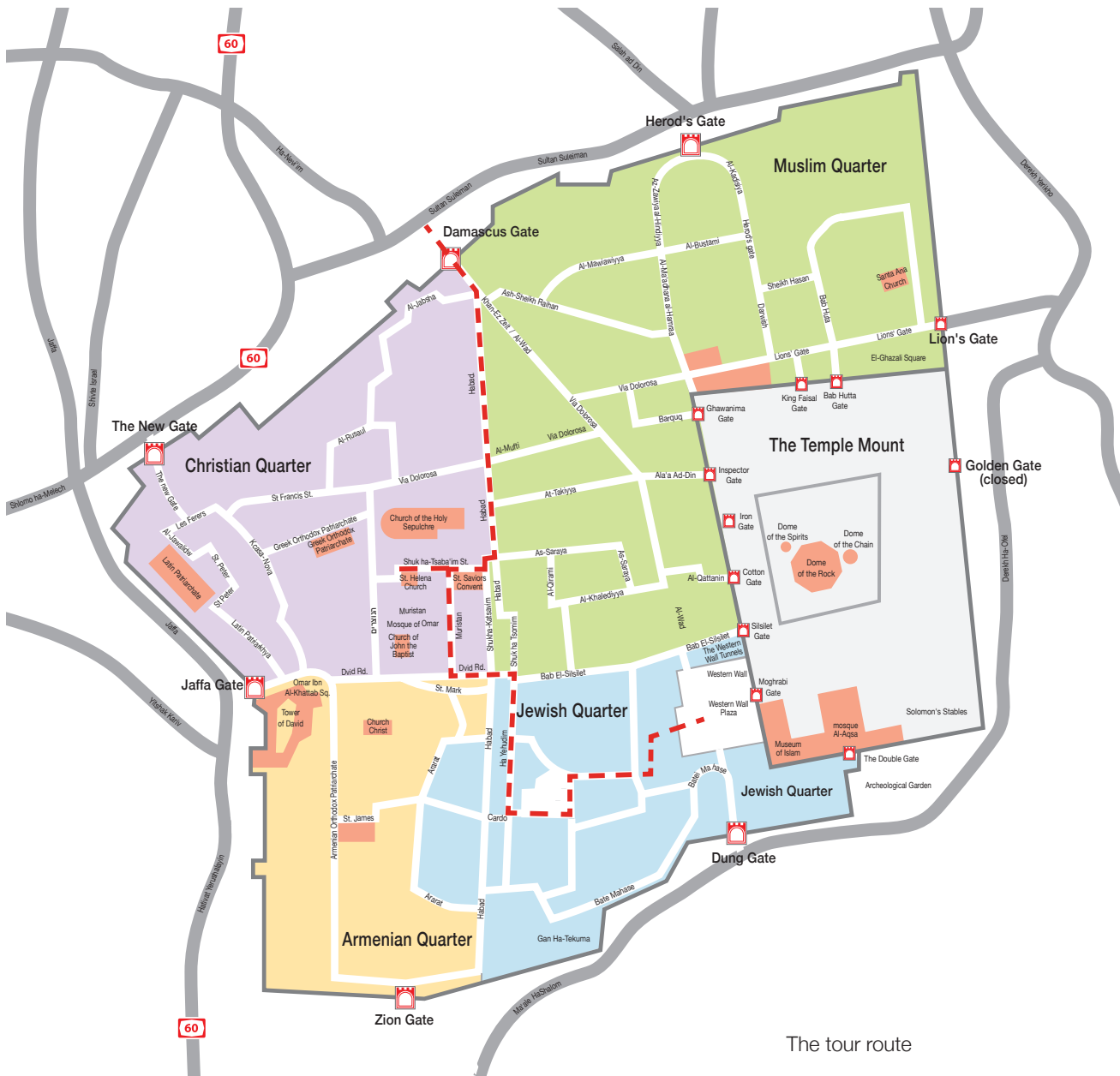
## Technical details worth knowing:

- The visit to the Hurva synagogue entails a fee. The visit must be coordinated in advance.
- Toilets can be found near Damascus Gate, at Muristan square, next to the Cardo and at the Western Wall Plaza. Not all the toilets have accessible booths.
- Prepare in advance as much as possible. For groups with communication disabilities - try to choose a walking route that is a little less crowded and prepare the participants before entering any crowded and noisy area.
- Choose as quiet guidance points as possible. Such points may be found at the entrance to Damascus Gate and at the roof observation point.
- Drop-off and collection points - the group can be dropped off near the Damascus Gate. Collection of the group from the Dung Gate near the Western Wall.

## Additional sites suitable for the tour

- In the City of David, a number of wonderful explanation and training aids have recently been designed, tailored for people with cognitive disabilities which may give an accessible explanation of the different periods and the significance of the archeology term in general. Admission is for a fee.
- The Tower of David has great accessible guidance for groups with cognitive disabilities. Admission is for a fee.





### An accessible tour map for travelers with cognitive disabilities

Route planning: Vered Sabag.  
 Graphic design: Studio Vered Bitan  
 Original Map: Rainer Lesniewski Dreamstime.com

### And here our paths part...

We tried to let you taste just a little of the experiences we have when we go on a tour with special groups. The Old City presents us with quite a few challenges, but nevertheless, there is a tremendous wealth of content, experiences, itineraries, which can produce a quality visiting experience tailored to any person with a disability.

The name of the game is early acquaintance - with the area, with its contents and with the touring population. With the help of early acquaintance, we will be able to choose the most appropriate and significant axis within the multiple possibilities that exist in the Old City. Adaptation and creativity are key tools in guiding groups



or independent travelers with disabilities. There is a lot of work, but at the end of the guidance, a lot of excitement and a significant sense of accomplishment is guaranteed.

We invite you to contact us via the association's email – [office@lotem.net](mailto:office@lotem.net) and together we will create a pleasant and accessible visit experience for anyone who needs it.



A group of hikers with cognitive disabilities at the Tower of David. Photo: courtesy of Lotem.