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'Our peoples can live together in peace and friendship'

Four Israelis and four Palestinians have achieved their goal of climbing and naming a previously unconquered mountain in Antarctica, in an effort to show that they can work together. Here we present the final excerpts from the team's diary

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18.01.04

A Special Tribute to the Expedition Support Team

We have crossed the seas and been to the top of the mountain. Now we, the members of the Breaking the Ice Antarctic expedition team, wish to express our deepest gratitude to the people whose help and encouragement made it possible for us to achieve our goals and whose patience and emotional support were invaluable during our long journey from home.

16.01.04

The Mountain of Israeli-Palestinian Friendship, Antarctica (66° S, 65° W)

The Summit

Fifteen days after departing from Puerto Williams, Chile on the ocean-going yacht Pelagic Australis and after a one-day delay due to bad weather, the members of the Israeli-Palestinian Antarctic peace expedition known as "Breaking the Ice" achieved their objective, scaling the summit of an unclimbed mountain near Prospect Point on the Antarctic Peninsula and dedicating their efforts to peace.

At the summit, Heskell Nathaniel, the expatriate Israeli businessman who conceived the idea for "Breaking the Ice", read a proclamation drafted by the entire expedition team. It expressed their belief that Israelis and Palestinians must resolve their deep differences without resorting to violence and went on to cite the personal experience of coexistence and cooperation they had gained during their journey together. Heskell then announced team's decision - reached after days of heated debate - to call the peak, "The Mountain of Israeli-Palestinian Friendship".

The name may lack the dazzle of these media savvy times, but it does seem to reflect the experience shared by the members of the expedition - total strangers who have learned to live and work - and even laugh - together and who have decided to supplant the failed search for political agreement among Israelis and Palestinians with a more personal approach to peace making.

The ceremonies at the summit were informal and varied. The three Palestinian men in the expedition team knelt in Muslim prayer. The Israelis opened a bottle of champagne for everyone. Palestinian team member Ziad Darwish was moved to tears. "This moment is so beautiful," he said, "seeing Israelis and Palestinians doing this kind of thing together. Yet, it also makes me think of all the horrible things we're doing to one another back home."

The summit statement:

"We, the members of Breaking the Ice, the Israeli-Palestinian expedition to Antarctica, having reached the conclusion of a long journey by land and sea from our homes in the Middle East to the southernmost reaches of the earth, now stand atop this unnamed

mountain. By reaching its summit we have proven that Palestinians and Israelis can cooperate with one another with mutual respect and trust. Despite the deep differences that exist between us, we have shown that we can carry on a sincere and meaningful dialogue. We join together in rejecting the use of violence in the solution of our problems and hereby declare that our peoples can and deserve to live together in peace and friendship. In expression of these beliefs and desires we hereby name this mountain **The Mountain of Israeli-Palestinian Friendship.**"

12.01.04

Prospect Point, Antarctica (66° S, 65° W)

When they awakened this morning, the members of the Israeli-Palestinian peace expedition to Antarctica were ready to take the first steps in the multi-day trek that will lead them to an unclimbed mountain, but nature had plotted overnight to delay their departure, locking their yacht, Pelagic Australis, among icebergs and sea ice.

It took several hours of organization and some deft rigging by the boat's captain Skip Novak before it was possible to begin transporting people and equipment to shore. Even after the process began several hours would pass until everything was ready for departure.

Finally, they were prepared to set off onto the glacier, wearing snowshoes, carrying backpacks and pulling heavy equipment behind them on plastic sleds. Expedition leader Doron Erel gave the order to rope the eight trekkers together into two groups of four. They will remain that way whenever in motion during the days ahead -- a safety measure against numerous deep crevasses hidden by a thick covering of snow. If any member of the team falls into one it will be up to all the others to stop the fall and pull him or her back out again. Without ropes - and teamwork - the dangers multiply.

The night before their departure, the expedition members argued vocally about the name they would give to the unclimbed peak that is their final destination - a name meant to symbolize their desire for peace. As usual, Avihu Shoshani, the Israeli attorney and Nasser Quass, the Palestinian political activist, were in the thick of the debate, disagreeing over every nuance of every name suggested by the others. It fell to Breaking the Ice initiator, Israeli businessman Hezkel Nathaniel and Ziad Darwish, the Palestinian journalist, to restore calm. Though the tempers finally cooled, the meeting ended without a decision.

11.01.04

Prospect Point, Antarctica (66° S, 65° W)

Trekkers on ice

There's an air of excitement on board this morning. The Breaking the Ice expedition is within sight of the mountain its eight Israeli and Palestinian team members hope to climb in the days ahead - the mountain from which they hope to tell the world that their two peoples can set aside their historic conflict and work together in pursuit of a better future.

The teamwork evident on the boat this morning belies the heated debate that erupted

last night in Pelagic Australis' saloon when the expedition members attempted to work out the language of the joint declaration they plan to issue upon reaching the summit of the mountain. They want to make a statement that will resonate strongly with both Israelis and Palestinians, but finding words general enough to be accepted by all yet strong enough to get the expedition's message across proved to be no easy task.

The conversation began calmly enough, with Breaking the Ice initiator Heskell Nathaniel suggesting that the resolution simply state the team's understanding that Israelis and Palestinians can live together in peace. "This is what we've seen here, among us," said Nathaniel. "We've been together for ten days now. Look at how we're getting along. This should be our message to the world - that we can do it, and that it can be done." The suggestion met with universal approval.

But the atmosphere began heating up when Suleiman al-Khatib suggested that the resolution be more specific, including an objection to the separation fence Israel is building between it and the Palestinians. Doron Erel argued that adopting a political stance was not the expedition's goal - that its message was and should remain human. When Ziad Darwish suggested that the resolution make a statement opposing all use of violence, Avihu Shoshani argued that Israel's actions toward the Palestinians were not violence but, rather, self-defense.

Vernadsky Research Station, Antarctica (65° S, 64° W)

Expedition Sparks International Affair

It all began with Catrin Ellis Jones' Pisco Sours (a mixture of pisco - an alcoholic beverage debatably of Peruvian or Chilean origin - fresh lemon juice, crushed ice, whisked egg whites and icing sugar). Fueled by the first mate's concoction, the evening took on a life of its own.

That's when Vladimir, Vladimir, Vladimir and Yevgeny showed up - two Ukrainian researchers, their station chief and cook - bearing a welcoming gift of vodka from the Vernadsky stores. Glasses were rapidly filled and raised in a toast to international friendship.

What followed (until some indeterminate hour of the morning) is difficult, and perhaps unwise, to describe. After all, Breaking the Ice is a very serious initiative - an attempt by Israelis and Palestinians to reach the summit of an unclimbed mountain in Antarctica in order to show their peoples that they can, indeed, work together in pursuit of shared objectives. So, suffice it to report the following: expedition leader Doron Erel really does know how to boogie; Palestinian Olfat Haider and Israeli Yarden Fanta have some great moves on the dance floor; given enough liquid encouragement, even mountain guides can lose their equilibrium; even in Antarctica, it's never too cold to take off your shirt; spending ten days together at sea is more than enough reason to let off some steam; and Catrin Ellis Jones makes a powerful pisco sour.

Yes, there are also days - and nights - like this here in the far southern latitudes. This one was a prelude to more difficult days and nights ahead as the expedition team gears up to leave its boats behind, pitch its tents and begin the long trek across the ice toward its final objective.

09.01.04

Hovgaard Island, Antarctica (65° S, 64° W)

The first summit

The scenery is so beautiful and, in these coastal waters, the sailing has become so smooth that, at moments, this seems more like a vacation than an expedition.

There's plenty of time for conversation and no lack of it. The subjects range from politics to family matters - children, professions, health and lifestyles. "You see," says Palestinian team member Suleiman al-Khatib, "we're not that different from one another. All of us have the same problems and we share the same desires. This is why I think that we can learn to live together, side by side."

On this morning there's excitement in the air. On Hovgaard Island the members of Breaking the Ice are about to climb their first mountain. This will be a training session meant to help develop the skills required for the final trek to an unclimbed peak on the mainland of the Antarctic Peninsula.

While the mountain guides refer to it as a 'recreational walk', reaching the top of this 380-meter high dome-shaped mountain will be an important test for all the expedition members (with the exception of Doron Erel, who has climbed to the summit of Mt. Everest). It's not merely a test of their physical abilities. It's a matter of principle. Climbing the mountain is meant to send a message - to show the world that when they work together as a team Palestinians and Israelis can reach their objectives.

About two hours after setting off, the members of the Breaking the Ice peace expedition reach their first summit. They raise their arms in exaltation. In Hebrew, Arabic and French they wish one another, "Happy Summit!" Skip Novak rewards the climbers with pieces of chocolate while, off to the side, Nasser Quass kneels in the fresh snow, chanting prayers to Allah.

08.01.04

Flags count - or do they?

The next day we set off to visit a colony of Gentoo penguins located a short dinghy ride away from their boats. Along the shoreline they watched the birds, about 30 to 40 centimeters high, waddling up and down the snow covered slopes from their nesting area and taking turns at entering the water to search for food. Scattered among the rocks on shore were a few old whalebones, evidently washed up here by storms. Before reaching Antarctica Pelagic Australis' captain, Skip Novak, had given everyone strict instructions to respect the environment, and not to take anything from or leave anything on Antarctic soil. The whalebones stayed where they were.

After taking stock of the penguins Avihu Shoshani, Nasser Quass and Suleiman al-Khatib found time to continue their debate from the night before. "You know," Shoshani told the others, "I may be an Israeli but I'm also a Palestinian. My grandparents lived in Hebron in what is now called the West Bank back in the days of the British Mandate when the entire area was known as Palestine." Eyebrows were raised for a moment at this comment and then the debate continued. It seems likely to

do so throughout our journey.

07.01.04

Heated debate

At the anchorage, Pelagic Australis met up with its sister ship, Pelagic, skippered by Richard Howarth, from England with Catrin Ellis Jones from Wales serving as first mate.

After dinner, the atmosphere became more heated as Avihu Shoshani, the Israeli lawyer and Nasser Quass, the Palestinian Al-Fatah activist from the Old City of Jerusalem, once again found themselves locked in debate.

As it has before, the argument revolved around Shoshani's claim that Israel wants peace but can't find a Palestinian partner with whom to make it. Quass begged to differ. "All the Palestinian leadership supports the Geneva Plan to have two states for two peoples, living side by side in peace," he said. "You give us back the lands you occupied in 1967," added al-Khatib, "and give us back our part of Jerusalem and then it will be no problem to make peace. We shouldn't fight one another. We should talk, even if we can't agree on everything."

"I agree with you on that," said Shoshani, "but I don't think your side is really ready to make peace. Yasser Arafat had the chance to make exactly that kind of deal with the Israelis at Camp David in 1999, and President Clinton was willing to help him, but Arafat walked away from the negotiations and since then he hasn't done anything to stop the terror attacks on Israelis. So with whom are we supposed to make peace?"

"You should make peace with the Palestinian people," said Quass.

"But the Palestinian people never make their voices heard," argued Shoshani. "Only Arafat and the Islamic fundamentalists like Hamas and Islamic Jihad are allowed to speak. You don't have democracy like we do in Israel. You can't say what you think. You're even afraid to express in public some of the opinions you've shared with me in private."

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