Meet Me in the Galilee
By Pamela Peled

Here’s one of those ‘only in Israel’ stories which begs to become an award-winning documentary.

Imagine: an aerial view of Tel Aviv, some 30 years ago, with Chava Alberstein singing in the background, or Matti Caspi. The camera swoops down on the Hilton Hotel. Enter 20-year old, pretty, blonde, vivacious Anne - in Israel on an internship for three months. As she opens the door of the hotel she catches the eye of a young security guard, just out of the army and working to pay for his studies. Three months later said guard, Danny Ayalon, asks Anne to marry him – on condition she agrees to live permanently in Israel. Anne converts from Christianity to Judaism, finishes her degree back in the States, and returns to marry the future Israeli Ambassador to Washington and our current Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Fade out with more mood music, and zoom in on the glowing stone walls of Jerusalem, home to three major religions. Focus on the most famous Wall of all and a couple of churches, and a mosque. The lens then discovers David Zwebner: tall, dark, and handsome, dashing between office meetings and prayer meetings and military meetings. A 9th generation Jerusalemite, David, who grew up in South Africa and Rhodesia (where his father was chief Rabbi) is a busy man. A graduate of Yeshivat Keren B’Yavneh, President of his Jerusalem Synagogue, a reservist in the IDF, Founder and CEO of Comstock, a commodity trading company, David sits on various boards of directors, plays tennis every day, and lives in Jerusalem with Ronit, his wife, their four children and eight grandchildren. But life isn’t busy enough for David; he decides to become a licensed tour guide on top of everything else. Studying the history and archeology of the land he loves, and its religions and institutions, David has an epiphany. As he comes face to face for the first time with Christianity he begins to think that the world, including both Jews and Christians, has done Jesus a great injustice.

“I am an orthodox Jew,” says David, “who was taught that even touching the books of the Gospels, let alone entering a church, was abhorrent. This is because of endless Jewish suffering at the hands of the Christians, from the Crusades to the present. But through my studies I came to understand that Jesus was an orthodox Jew too – a Pharisee – who lived during the time of the Roman occupation of Palestine and who was anti the corruption rampant in the Jewish Temple. He foresaw the impending breakdown of our society and the destruction of the Temple, kept the mitzvot and preached the laws of

Hillel and Rabbi Akiva – love thy neighbor as thyself. Christianity started over 300 years after Jesus died.” Until then, explains David, Christianity was actually ‘Judaism-lite’ meant for the Roman pagans; it only really caught on when Helena and her son, King Constantine, believing that ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em’, adopted it as the official religion of Rome.

Here’s where the documentary begins to glow with that most ethereal of qualities – a ‘Good Idea’ combined with the power to ‘Make It Happen’. Back to Anne, who for 20 years has developed a high powered career in Hi Tech, raised her two daughters and stood by her husband as he worked for Israel, and who now decides that there must be a way that she can make a difference in Israel.

And then it comes to her, in a flash. Why not build a plush resort and spa hotel in the Galilee on the banks of Lake Tiberias, in the very place where Jesus established his ministry 2000 years ago? Anne envisages an elegant, restful space, comprising a hotel and a campus with educational facilities, a performing arts auditorium, an outdoor amphitheater, conference center, broadcast studio and house of worship – everything, in short, to provide a meaningful, spiritual and pleasant environment where Christian pilgrims can rest, work and foster unity through studying the commonalities of Judaism and Christianity. Not to mention fully kosher gourmet food, luxurious beds and swish bathrooms complete with fluffy towels and spa lotions at the end of all that prayer and worship. It’s a win-win plan: the Galilee benefits

Matti Avshalomov, Architect and Zoning Director for Migdal, David Zwebner, Anne Ayalon and Herzl Getz, Mayor of Migdal.
with an injection of capital and added jobs, the
country woos more tourists, and the tourists get a
wonderful new base from which to see the places
where Jesus himself lived and worked.

“There are 3,000,000 tourists to Israel a year,”
explains Anne, “of whom 65% are Christians. The
aim is to bring up to 10,000,000 tourists annually
within the next 15 years, and if the proportions
remain constant, that’s a lot of Christians visiting
the Holy Land.”

Anne has the understanding: at Ariel Sharon’s
bidding, the Ayalons developed strong ties
with Christian leaders during their tenure in
Washington, and Anne’s background positions her
perfectly to act as a bridge between Christians
and Israelis. She also has the figures: 2 billion
Christians in the world, 800 million Evangelicals
and 300 million strong advocates of Israel - all
potential tourists. At the moment Christian
pilgrims to the country are based in Jerusalem and
tour the Galilee on the fly – rushing from the Sea
of Galilee where Jesus walked on water to Gennesaret
and the Mount of the Beatitudes where he prayed
and healed the sick; racing from Capernaum, where
he lived, to Migdal, home to Mary Magdalene, and
squeezing in other holy sites in a frantic dash to see
everything before returning to their hotel in the
capital at night.

Anne envisaged a place of refuge right in the
center of the birthplace of Christianity, called ‘The
Galilean’, and she set about researching
possibilities - like how to raise the requisite initial
$15,000,000 needed to break ground (out of a total
of $76,000,000 necessary to complete the project). A
mutual friend suggested that she approach Zwebner
for help; Anne picked up the phone and dialed, and
the concept became a business plan.

David has the know-how: a successful
businessman with years of entrepreneurial
experience, he was easily conscripted to the
cause. His interest in the religions of the region
encouraged him to facilitate cooperation with the
Christian community and to understand some
of its intricacies: the widening gap, for example,
between Catholics and Evangelicals. The former
view themselves as the ‘real Jews’ and believe
that traditional Jews have gone astray, while
Evangelicals trust that the prophecies of the Old
Testament are coming true, and that the Jews
are the chosen people. Quoting Genesis 12:iii they
believe that “God blesses those who bless Israel”,
and align themselves with Jews and their country,
even, according to David, sometimes keeping
Shabbat and the rules of kashrut!

More and more Christians and Jews are now
researching these issues, and David has conscripted
many onto his board, including Rabbi Dr. Shlomo
Riskin, Rabbi Benny Lau, Mr. Isi Liebler, and Rabbi
David Rosen as well as many Jews and Christians
in Israel and abroad. To raise money the board
has come up with imaginative ideas: for $250,000
investors can ensure a Galilean Club lifetime
membership entitling them to 70 free nights at
the resort each year, and a host of other benefits.
Or, for $100 you can sponsor 1 square foot of the
project, and be registered in the Library of the
Galilean. There are options in between: donate the
altar in the House of Worship for $1 million, or join
the Fisherman’s Club for an annual subscription of
$150. Funds are collected through a nonprofit
organization in Israel. The Israeli government has
promised a 20% grant after 20% of the funding has
been raised, and the founders are hopeful that they
will break holy ground by the end of the year.

And that’s how the documentary will surely
end: a slow-motion unfolding of the campus/resort
rising on the lake, with a whole host of people of all
religions streaming towards the sparkling waters
and smilingly saying to each other: “Meet me in
the Galilee.” And peace on earth would surely follow ...
but that’s another movie.

Visit http://www.galileanresort.com

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