

“To travel to far-away lands is a half way to liberation”  
*Tibetan yogi and poet Milarepa*

One of the delicious perks of university is being able to choose scientific conferences in interesting places. Milarepa probably meant many profound things in the above citation; one of them is that traveling allows seeing oneself and others more clearly.

This September I went to a conference on cell biophysics in Zefat. This is a very unusual conference venue – Zefat is a city in Israel at the northern border with Lebanon, not far from Golan Heights. Originally, the conference was scheduled one year earlier, but then the violence between Israel and Hezbollah broke, and Zefat, among other places, was shelled with Katyusha rockets. This time everything went without a glitch. The conference was very interesting. Pierre Gilles De Gennes, famous French physicist (he received Nobel Prize for Physics in 1991 for theories of complex matter, such as liquid crystals and polymers) was supposed to give a keynote address, but died a few months earlier, so the conference was in his honor. There were many excellent talks on physics and mathematics of peculiar active skeleton of live cells, given by colleagues from Israel, France and USA, and time flew, but there was also a lot of fun: roaming old city, going on excursions.

Zefat is an ancient Jewish city with a history going back for more than two millennia. Its old quarter is a delightful maze of limestone houses and synagogues founded by famous rabbis. It is a cradle of Cabbala – mystical teachings based on an esoteric interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Immediate association, of course, is Madonna, which irritates Jews on the streets of Zefat to no end: they told me that in fact women are forbidden to study Cabbala at all, and only man older than 40 with at least 20 years of Judaic training are allowed to learn... Those Jews are very talkative, have fantastic hairdos with long side locks and wear picturesque garb – black Hasidic caftans, prayer shawls, yarmulkes. There are also many secular artists in the old city, mostly immigrants from Russia, hawking aquarelles of moody landscapes. One of them told me a typically Russian joke: “Painting is a job, selling paintings is an art.” Another fixture in Zefat is a bunch of colorful burly guys squeezing fresh juices out of oranges, carrots and pomegranates (the latter is a holy fruit in Judaism – its number of seeds – 613 – corresponds with the 613 commandments of the Torah). Those juices are delicious in a stifling heat usual at the north of Israel in September.

On one of the days we went on a bus trip to the Sea of Galilee, known otherwise as Lake Kinneret. Christianity was born on its shores, so our small secular group was mingling with throngs of pilgrim devotees. Like in ancient times, we went on feet, rivulets of sweat streaming on our backs (it was 42C with 90% humidity), from one church to another, where according to New Testament, Jesus (Christ, not Professor De Loera) fed thousands of people with a few fishes and loaves of bread. In the evening the heat subsided, and we were recovering from hunger, heat and dehydration by sitting on the beach, enjoying breeze from the lake, and washing down delicious local cheese with pints of cold lager.

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To appreciate the beauty of it, look up my photos at  
<http://www.math.ucdavis.edu/~mogilner/IsraelGreece.pdf>