On Sunday evening, March 19, 2000, David Isgur, assistant executive director of the University’s Office of Communications, flew to Israel with a group of about 65 travelers connected to the Bethsaida Excavations Project, an archaeological site that dates back to the time of Jesus. The group from the University of Hartford, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and other institutions toured the Holy Land at the time of Pope John Paul II’s historic visit. Delegates from the University included President Walter Harrison, second from right; Arnold C. Greenberg, chairman of the board of regents, right; and Professor Richard Freund, director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies. During an audience with the pope on March 24, the University delegation presented the pontiff with a replica of an iron door key found at the Bethsaida archaeological site. Isgur’s report follows.
Bethsaida, a city by the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, is one of the most important sites in the history of early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. It is recognized as the home of many of the major apostles, including Peter, Philip, and Andrew, and as the place where Jesus performed many of the New Testament miracles, such as restoring sight to a blind man, walking on water, and feeding the multitudes. Bethsaida disappeared sometime after A.D. 300, apparently the victim of a major earthquake and catastrophic flood. In 1987, a team of archaeologists, scientists, and biblical scholars, led by Professor Richard Freund, now of the University of Hartford, and Professor Rami Arav of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, began a series of probes and excavations that proved the site was indeed the lost city.

Our group’s introduction to Bethsaida came near the end of our week, on the evening of Friday, March 24, and coincided with Pope John Paul II’s visit to the site…sort of. As part of his history-making tour of the Holy Land, the pontiff was scheduled to fly over Bethsaida in his helicopter, while we stood below and waved up at him. Despite the cold rain, about 50 of our group stood outside, shivering and wet, and waited excitedly, straining to catch a glimpse of the helicopter in the night sky.

A bank of lights placed near the city gates had been brought in to record the pope’s arrival, and eventually he did fly over. But for me, the most memorable moment had already passed by. While we all waited, it occurred to me that here I was, standing on the stones where the apostles had walked, perhaps even touching the same walls. At that moment, I could truly understand the importance of the excavation and restoration. History and significance emanated from every rock, especially at night, when much of the site was lit only by oil lamps.

Then again, this trip would turn out to be full of special moments. Our little band from the University had begun its grand adventure at Bradley International Airport, where our mounting excitement kept us from even sitting down. From Hartford, we flew to O’Hare Airport in Chicago, where we met our counterparts from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. It was there that Amy Hecht of the Greenberg Center showed us the two replicas of the Key to the Fisherman’s House, heightening our sense that we were on an important mission. From Chicago we flew on to Frankfurt, Germany, and then finally to Tel Aviv.

During our seven days in Israel, we had a pair of extraordinary tour guides: Richard Freund and Rami Arav, two scholars who have dedicated their lives to exploring the history of this land. Our itinerary was designed to cram as many experiences as possible into our week. For example, we awoke on Wednesday, March 22, and began the day with an early bus trip to Yad Vashem, a memorial to the victims of the Shoah. More and more Jews are rejecting the term Holocaust, a theological word for “holy burning,” and adopting Shoah, which means “a total destruction that occurs for no apparent reason.” I found myself in tears twice at Yad Vashem, along with others in our group who were deeply moved.

From Yad Vashem, we traveled to the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. In the museum cafeteria we had our first real hamantaschen, a traditional treat for Purim, a two-day holiday in March celebrating the uncovering of a plot to destroy the Jews of ancient Persia and the punishment of the man responsible. Hamantaschen are tricornered pastries filled with dates, figs, prunes, or apricots, my favorite.

Driving south into the desert, we reached the ruins of Masada by the middle of the afternoon and had a couple of hours to explore. Masada is the site of one of the most poignant stories in Jewish history. The desert outpost of a group of Jewish rebels, Masada had withstood a Roman siege in approximately A.D. 70 for over a year. When the rebels realized that the Roman army was about to storm the outpost, they drew lots. The 10 that were chosen killed the others and then turned their swords on themselves, leaving the Romans with an empty victory.

On the return trip, we stopped on the shore of the Dead Sea, where some of us could not resist the experience of wading in the lake. Because the Dead Sea is so full of salt and other minerals, its buoyancy is greatly enhanced. The Jordan River, which feeds the lake, is being siphoned off by Israelis and Jordanians for irrigation and other purposes. If this practice continues, the Dead Sea may well be dried up in 100 years. By the time we arrived back at our hotel that evening, we were on sensory overload.

From our visit to the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on our first day to our trip into the Golan Heights the following Saturday, our days were filled with special moments. We watched people line up to be baptized in the Jordan River. We touched a Syrian tank that had been left in front of a kibbutz as a reminder of the Six-Day War. We were scolded by priests at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem because our tour guide had taken us in via the exit door. I prayed with a couple of Hasidic Jews at the
Looking over the ancient Jewish rebel stronghold of Masada from the structure that was once part of King Herod’s palace on top of this desert plateau are from left, Dianne Harrison, Margy Steinberg, Arnold C. Greenberg, Walter Harrison and Patricia Cremins. Greenberg, chairman of the board of regents, said he has been to Israel many times, but this one was special because of the historical and spiritual significance of the papal visit. “Seeing the pope’s sermon on the Mount of Beatitudes, being part of the papal delegation, being close enough to touch him, and having all that happen in Galilee, which is so rich in history and so very near Bethsaida itself,” made this a most memorable trip for Greenberg.

During the evening of Tuesday, March 21, we attended a dance performance at the Shrine of the Book, a museum in Jerusalem dedicated to the Dead Sea Scrolls. The theater-in-the-round performance of “From the Profane to the Sacred: The Judean Desert Community” marked the first time that such a performance had taken place at the museum. This wonderful and exciting evening was presented for us alone.

And we had moments of humor; among them, seeing President Harrison and Chairman Greenberg in togas and laurel wreaths and Professor Freund in a Roman helmet with sword in hand, as they sat down for lunch earlier that same day. Because the Cardo Culinaria restaurant is located above the ruins of an ancient Roman building, its owner decided to replicate the first-century Roman dining experience for his patrons. As a result, each diner is either wrapped in a toga with a wreath on his or her head or dressed as a Roman legionnaire with a red-plumed, golden helmet. At one point, Nancy O’Brien, chair of the University of Nebraska at Omaha Board of Regents, was placed on a fainting couch, fanned with feathers, and given a foot massage with ancient oils. In addition, our waitstaff provided storytelling and dancing.

Rising before dawn on Friday, members of our group who were attending the papal mass at the Mount of Beatitudes were out of the hotel by 4:30 a.m. President Harrison, Chairman Greenberg, and Professor Freund stayed behind in order to leave at 1 p.m. for their private audience with the pope (see “Key to the Kingdom”). That evening, we all met back at the hotel for dinner and to share stories about the events of the day.

On Sunday, March 26, our last day in Israel, we had our first sight of Bethsaida in the daylight. Under bright blue skies, we gathered for the dedication of a new stone sign near the entrance to the Bethsaida archaeological park. Freund, Greenberg, and Harrison proudly unveiled the sign and pointed out the name of the University of Hartford, newly added to the list of 16 colleges and universities involved in the project. Professor Arav then gave the group a tour of the site, describing what has been uncovered so far and talking about plans for the next round of excavations.

Earlier in the day, we had visited a museum on the Nof Ginosaur kibbutz that houses various archaeological discoveries from the area, including a first-century fishing boat sometimes referred to as the “Jesus boat.” In the basement of the museum are the labs where archaeological finds from Bethsaida are reconstructed.

So ended our seven extraordinary days in Israel, a land of intense contradictions. We had traveled from desert to lush and fertile valleys and from cities to nomadic Bedouin encampments. We had experienced the sacred and the irreverent, witnessed both humor and pathos, and encountered history and politics—and it was all part of the heady mix that is Israel.
The pinnacle of the entire trip to Israel came when representatives of the Bethsaida Excavations Project presented Pope John Paul II with the “Key to the Kingdom”—a replica of an iron door key that was unearthed at Bethsaida, home of the apostles Peter, Andrew, and Philip. The presentation was part of an audience with the pontiff on Friday, March 24, during his historic visit to Israel.

The replica of what is known as the Key to the Fisherman’s House that was given to the pope was created by Thomas Bradley ’77, associate dean of the Hartford Art School at the University. The original artifact will remain in Israel under the protection of the Israeli Antiquities Commission.

Bradley was happy to have been asked to work on the replica. He was even happier to be working in the studio. “This project allowed me to do the things I love: teaching and getting dirty, the physical work of making,” he said. “Working with metal this way is magical,” he added. “It’s alchemy—liquefying an ingot of metal and then transforming it into a piece of art.”

When Bradley first started working on the replica of the key, he was mostly focused on getting it to look as much like the original as possible and completing the project on time. “By the time I had finished, though, the significance started to sink in,” he said, adding that it was really his children who helped him realize what he was involved in. “They were studying the pope’s visit to Israel in school as part of current events, and they started asking me all kinds of questions about it,” he said, noting that one of his kids took a partially constructed replica into school for show-and-tell.

Bradley said that when he contemplated the project, he was faced with two major challenges. One was that the original key was made of iron and had roughly 2,000 years to develop its patina, its color. “There was no way I could duplicate that in an iron key,” he said, “so I decided to make a replica in bronze, which can be made to look as if it has that patina. Then I decided to make two replicas, one in bronze and one in iron. That led to the second challenge—working with these two different metals required two different processes.”

Iron has to be worked on when it is hot, heated to more than 1,200 degrees, while bronze requires much cooler temperatures, Bradley said. The technology he used was similar to the way keys were made 2,000 years ago, although he was fortunate enough not to have had to make his own iron.

The original iron key was uncovered in 1995 near the doorway of a fisherman’s house at Bethsaida. It is a simple, Roman-period key to a large wooden door lock. The discovery of the key, encrusted with rust and slightly broken where it would have fit on a key ring, was itself a near-miracle in that it survived the damp and changing climatic conditions in this area of Israel, said Richard Freund, director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project and the University’s Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies.

The Key to the Fisherman’s House, was immediately recognized as a most significant find by Bargil Pixner, one of the major archaeologists for the Roman Catholic Church in Israel. It was Father Pixner who made the arrangements for the audience with the pope during his trip to Israel and who asked about a special presentation of the key.

The Bethsaida Excavations Project, founded in 1987, uncovered one of the last major cities associated with the life of Jesus and early Christianity, the city of Bethsaida. Lost since a major earthquake and catastrophic flood destroyed all signs of the city, the site has been slowly recovered by Freund and their team of excavators.

Freund, an ordained rabbi, said working on the Bethsaida project, which has been followed by people across the globe, has been an overwhelming experience. “Usually, academic work is only important to a small handful of scholars, but our work at Bethsaida has affected so many millions of the faithful worldwide, and that has been extremely rewarding,” he said.

Knowing that he has created a piece of art that will be on display at the Vatican is very special, Bradley said. “Even if it ends up being put in a kitchen drawer, it’s still in the kitchen drawer at the Vatican,” he said with a laugh.

—David Isgur