

CHRISTIAN TOURISM COULD PROSPER MORE IN ISRAEL



Every year, around 700 thousand pilgrims arrive to Israel according to the latest data of the Ministry of Tourism. The number is much smaller than the 5 million people who visit the Virgin of Lourdes in France, or the Virgin of Fatima in Portugal. Christian tourism is thus not fully exploited according to the Israeli authorities.

According to specialists from the Department of Tourism, the potential for christian tourism to Israel is ten million tourists per year. **Most of them come from wealthy countries.**

Deputy Ayman Odeh said "Israel does not invest enough in Christian tourism, or in marketing and infrastructure." Other Arab members of the Joint List expressed the view that Christian sites such as Bethlehem and Nazareth are not being exploited to their full potential.

Tarek Shahada, of Nazareth's Organization for Tourism and Culture said that "despite the increase in tourism last year, the Tourism Office has not been in charge of promoting the city for years, which is undermining its potential for Christian tourism".

Amir Halevi, Manager of the Tourism Office, said in response, that his office views pilgrim tourism as a very important segment of the market, and does not want to lose it. He stressed that "part of the general increase in tourism is due to the segment of Christian tourists, but it is difficult to measure the data since this segment is not only comprised of groups of tourists, but also of individuals. **In recent years, new phenomena have been taking place, such as the arrival of Orthodox priests interested in enjoying Tel Aviv**".

Halevi concluded that having a company dedicated to the development of tourist infrastructure could trigger a major change in cities like Nazareth, similar to the city of Akko's model.

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