

TRAVEL

# A Diverse Group Kilimanjaro



Howard Blas

**T**wenty-seven climbers with different abilities—many with strong connections to Brooklyn and Long Island—recently returned from the adventure of a lifetime—climbing up Tanzania’s Mount Kilimanjaro. The climb benefited Friends of Access Israel (FAISR), an organization promoting accessibility, inclusion, and respect for people of all abilities around the world. FAISR’s collaborative partner, Access Israel, was founded just over 20 years ago in Israel and hosts an international conference each year, called “Feasts of the Senses.” The organization consults on accessibility and inclusion worldwide. The climb was the brainchild of Jamie Lassner, Executive Director of FAISR, to make a statement that in life large goals are often [#AccessibleTogether](#).

The FAISR Kilimanjaro 2020 Team included hikers from Texas, Montana, New York, New Jersey and Israel, as well as a robust Tanzanian support staff including three cooks, 21 guides, and 70 porters. Porters carried everyone’s clothing and sleeping bags, as well as food, water and cooking supplies. Cooks provided kosher meals both at the huts and along the route. Daily mileage up the dormant volcano ranged from 3.1 miles on the acclimation days, to 13.7 miles

during the final midnight to sunrise ascent to the summit.

Lassner, who worked with the Chabad rabbi of Zanzibar, Tanzania, arrived a few days before the other climbers to purchase new pots and pans, utensils, fruits, vegetables, peanut butter and pasta. Sabino Kweka, a former porter and guide, who organized the climb had some experience working with Jewish and Israeli travelers and was very helpful in securing kosher supplies and educating his staff about kosher food preparation.

“I have lead a number of Israelis. One group didn’t hike on Saturdays; another asked that we cook with olive oil instead of other oils,” reported Kweka. Veteran guide, Shani Mrema, observed that “Israelis are very fast,” usually preferring to reach the summit in four days instead of the recommended six days.

Lassner’s wife, Mara, purchased kosher grape juice and challah rolls in New York which she shared with the group during Shabbat dinner and lunch, celebrated at the Kibo Hut, four days in to the hike, at over 15,000 feet.

Four hikers with paraplegia were able to reach the Kilimanjaro summit, thanks to the Israeli designed Paratrek “Trekker,” a durable chair which relies both on the efforts of the rider, and the support of six

# of Climbers Show That Is Accessible Together



porters pushing, pulling and guiding the vehicle—often over steep and rocky terrain. The hikers with physical disabilities included Marcela Maranon, a Peruvian-born amputee and paraplegic from Dallas, Texas, Starla Hilliard-Barnes of Utah, a twice paralyzed participant, Israeli Arnon Amit, paralyzed in a car accident during his IDF army service, and Arnold John, a father of three, who lives at the base of Kilimanjaro and always dreamed of making it to the top.

All Trekkers shared Lassner's appreciation of Omer Zur, designer and CEO of Paratrek, and Rowee Benishty, a colleague who helped transport, assemble and maintain the vehicles, then trained the porters on proper procedures for using them. Zur initially designed the Trekker to enable his father, paralyzed during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, to participate in outdoor adventures with friends.

Lassner proudly observed, "When Friends of Access Israel decided to create a team of diverse people with different abilities to climb Kilimanjaro, our goal was to show the world that with a group of individuals giving of themselves, we can conquer the *roof of Africa*" (Kilimanjaro).

Our FAISR Kilimanjaro 2020 family had an abundance of emotional moments. One of the many that stand out was celebrating with tears of joy the accomplishment of our teammate Arnold, a 44 year Tanzanian man who became the first Tanzanian person with paraplegia to reach the peak, thanks to amazing technology and the incred-

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## Climbing Kilimanjaro...

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ible efforts of our trekking family." It was even more special because Tanzanians with disabilities are openly ostracized.

The group set out from the base of Kilimanjaro on February 4th and followed the Marangu route, also known as the Coca Cola Trail. They spent one night at the Mandara Hut (8,858 feet), a night at the Horombo Hut (12,139 feet), and Shabbat at the Kibo Hut (15,419 feet).

Friday night services and dinner were held in the communal dining room and dorms. Everyone was aware that in exactly 24 hours—at the conclusion of Shabbat—they would attempt the all-night, cold and snowy climb to the 19,340 foot Uhuru Peak.

On Shabbat morning, prayer services took place in a cold wooden dorm room. Several Brooklynites took part in, and were on hand for, the service. They included Flatbush graduate, Ari Storch (YoFHS 1988), Dr. Aaron Gindea (YoFHS 1974), and his wife, Geri (nee Shapiro, YoFHS 1977), David Ickson, president of Orach Chaim, and wife, Lilly (YoFHS 1983). David Ickson

respectfully transported a Torah scroll from Manhattan to Nairobi to Tanzania and back. Gindea was touched by the entire communal Jewish experience on the mountain, and by an experience several days' post-climb with the small Jewish community of Arusha.

The group set out Saturday night at 11:30 pm on their final ascent. They trekked in the dark, with head lamps and many warm layers of clothing, for approximately nine hours. They experienced steep terrain, rapid heartbeats, nausea and overall tiredness. Thankfully, each participant—with and without disabilities—reached one of the three summits—Stella's Point (18,884 feet), Gilman's Point (18,651 feet), or Uhuru Peak (19,668 feet).

The group celebrated their monumental accomplishment with a festive dinner and awards ceremony, a two-day safari at the Tarangire National Park, and the Ngorongoro Conservation Park, a visit to Shanga Village, a vocational training program for people with disabilities, and opportunities to purchase colorful, hand-crafted souvenirs at Shanga,

the Arusha Cultural Heritage Center and at the Maasai Market.

Some members of the group took advantage of the unique opportunity to meet the small Arusha Jewish community for morning prayer services. The members of this unique Jewish community are descendants of Yemenite and Moroccan Jews who came to eastern Africa in the 1880s.

We were warmly welcomed by community head, Yehuda Amir Kahalani, and we were pleased to present the synagogue with Sephardic Art Scroll siddurim.

As the tired, very satisfied group began the long journey home, each participant reflected on the meaning of this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Amy Verschleiser summed up the group's feelings, "I feel that this opportunity to climb with such a diverse and inspirational group really spoke to my soul. It was so unique and life-changing." □

*Howard Blas is a freelance writer, social worker and Jewish special educator. He writes for several Jewish publications and global news services. He conquered Kilimanjaro with Friends of Access Israel.*