

Do you believe in Miracles – Sermon for Rosh Hashana – Rabbi Wise

As we gathered at Pearson airport to depart for Israel, I looked around the gate area at the excited faces. Finally our trip was underway. We boarded the El Al jet and settled into our seats. After a few hours of flying, as my eyes were closing, someone tapped me on the shoulder and woke me. “I need you for a minyan”. Only on El Al.

I said “sure I can join, how many more do you need”

“so far its just you and me”. He looked disappointed.

I stood up and declared, “meet me at the back of the plane in 5 minutes.”

“where will this minyan come from” he asked

“don’t worry, I’m from Oakville”.

Sure enough I walked the aisle and grabbed as many of the group as I needed and 5 minutes later we had more than a minyan praying mincha in the galley. The man said kaddish and as the service ended he said, “its a miracle you found these people so quickly.”

I said its not a miracle, its Shaarei-Beth El, 44 people on our way to Israel.

He said, 44 people from Oakville, - Mashiah - that is truly a miracle.

Now I had a mission for our Israel trip, to see every miraculous site in our homeland. I figured we had 10 days to see the whole country and sleep was overrated. I started working off a typical birthright trip intended for 21 year olds, and then added a few things each day. Some might call it mission impossible, I call it generously optimistic. For example, on the day we left Toronto in the early afternoon, after flying through the night for 12 hours and landing at Ben Gurion airport at 8am, we immediately set out to visit Caesaria, the detention centre at Atlit, plant trees in the Galilee and then out for a the night on the town in Tiberius. I call that Day 1.

By the next morning, at breakfast at 7 am, Marty Rich reminded me that our average age was 71 not 21, so I slowed down a little bit to make it more manageable. But a few days later on our way to Tel Aviv, to the group’s astonishment, I decided we had to visit a little kibbutz located on a small hill just outside Rehovot. This kibbutz was not even a real kibbutz. So why did we squeeze it in. I’ll tell you.

The Guide who met us in the visitor centre, took us to a tiny hut where all 44 of us were crammed in like sardines. It appeared to be a laundry room, as there were some long wooden tables and two large old fashioned laundry machines. The guide waited until we were silent and then began his tale.

In the 1930’s the Yishuv, the word describing the Jewish settlement of Israel before independence, were quite aware that while the British controlled Palestine for now, there would eventually come a time when the Jewish people would have to fight for their own state. Whether it would be fighting against the British to end the mandate, or fighting against the local Arab groups who had already begun to attack Jewish settlements and cities, there would come a time when they needed to be ready. Thinking ahead, they knew they might be able to smuggle in weapons or buy them, but the problem was how to get a huge supply of ammunition. The easy answer was to make their own, but with the British controlling all goods in and out of Palestine, importing a bullet-making machine was virtually impossible. Even if they could somehow get one into the Yishuv, where would they hide such a loud and dangerous machine whose very possession would result in the death penalty.

Fortunately the British always underestimated Jewish ingenuity and chutzpah.

After years of searching, the Haganah finally found a bullet- making machine in 1938 - in Poland of all places. They broke it down into small pieces but could only ship it as far as Beirut with the British watching. Then Yosef Avidar, head of the secret Israel Military Institute, had two brilliant ideas. First he arranged for Jews serving in the British army to smuggle the machine into Israel disguised as a printing press - telling the customs agents they were starting a newspaper. Second a small dedicated group of Haganah and Palmach leaders created the Ayalon Institute- a kibbutz, they told the British, where Jews who first came to Palestine would learn about Kibbutz life and farming techniques. Meanwhile the kibbutz would actually be an underground military training site. Above ground they built housing, a dining hall, chicken coop, cow barn, workshops, a laundry, a bakery, and a vegetable garden to give the outward appearance of an ordinary kibbutz.

But underground was a different story. The bullet making machine was smuggled there and placed 13 feet underground in a small chamber.

And here is where the story gets even better. A laundry room was built directly over the factory to disguise pipes that discharged polluted air from below. But more importantly, to conceal the noise of the bullet- making machinery. The laundry facility ran 24 hours a day was actually so good at making clean laundry, that the British soldiers located at their nearby base, wanted to use their services. To keep the soldiers away the kibbutz provided a pick up and delivery service to their enemies. The British were so happy with their clean laundry they never inspected it, even while knowing that somewhere nearby the Jews were making bullets, never suspecting it was literally under their feet.

As we were sitting in the laundry room, the guide suddenly grabbed the side of the laundry machine and began to push it. As it moved aside we all crowded around and saw a hole with a ladder. Our group climbed down the ladder into the factory, that was left behind just as it was in 1947.

As we looked around we realized the Jews thought of everything. For example, if the people working underground all day were seen walking around the kibbutz, they would look suspiciously pale from being out of the sun. They therefore built a small sunlamp that each person used once a day to give them a tan.

They also needed huge deliveries of copper to make the bullet casings. The Jews explained they were making kosher lipstick tubes. The British accepted this explanation and the Kibbutz even gave gifts of lipsticks cases to the British officials at the base. At one point a group of British soldiers visiting the kibbutz complained that the beer they were given was warm, so the kibbutz members said that if the soldiers would give them advance notice of their visits they would be sure the beer was properly chilled. The British fell for the ruse and this allowed the kibbutz to prepare for inspection visits.

Making bullets with live gunpowder is very dangerous especially in cramped conditions with people working right above. Our own Rachel Hamburg was the only one who could sit comfortably at the desk where the bullets were made and built a casing to give us an example. After the bullets were created, they were smuggled to fighters all around the country in compartments hidden in fuel trucks. Who would think to check for bullets in a fuel truck? At every step of the way there was fear that something would explode, someone would get caught, and the British would figure it out. But miraculously it all worked out.

Between 1945 and 1948 they produced 2 million 9m bullets, at the rate of 40,000 a day, until the British were forced out. Shortly after independence Israel no longer had to conceal its operations and moved them above ground. Years later the factory was restored and turned into a museum. It sounds like we spent all day there, but in just about one hour we learned so much.

And as we ventured throughout Israel we became aware time and time again of the miracle of the very existence

of the Jewish state.

We visited sites where Abraham might have lived after fleeing his father.

We learned of the many nations that had attacked and conquered Israel time after time.

We saw how this band of stubborn monotheists, maintaining their conviction in one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, refused to yield.

We visited the Temple in Jerusalem that was built by King Solomon but was destroyed, resulting in our exile to Babylon.

We came back, built it again, only to have it destroyed again by the Romans.

The one remaining wall from 2000 years ago is still there, but the Romans are gone. And so we Jews pray there, as though we had never left.

We went to Tzfat where we learned that, after a few hundred years of the Golden Age in Spain, when Jews were permitted to be artists, , philosophers, landowners, doctors and even advisors to monarchs , the entire community was either forced to convert to Christianity, or exiled. Choosing exile, a number of them made their way to Israel and settled in this beautiful city in the mountains of the galilee. There they not only survived, but flourished, creating new ways to pray and expressing their Judaism through new music, kabbalistic philosophy and spiritual practices. We walked the narrow stone alleyways, visited the small synagogues and artist workshops and were touched by the unique and beautiful nature of this small mountaintop Jewish community that transformed the way Jews pray around the world.

A different day we went to the Golan Heights and saw the spot where Israel was basically saved from annihilation. This year 2013 marks the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur war, so named because the Arab armies from the countries surrounding Israel: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Iran and Egypt, all attacked us simultaneously on our holiest day of the year to catch us by surprise. We went up to Kibbutz El Rom, one of the highest peaks in northern Israel, the mountain that we have held since 1967.

That Yom Kippur night a line of tanks patrolled the border with Syria. While most Israelis were praying in synagogues, a few Israeli tanks suddenly realized they were under attack as hundreds of brand new Russian-made tanks, equipped with night vision, flooded across the mountain passes. If they passed this border they would be free to sweep into Israel from the north and attack Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Our tanks were outgunned and outmanned, but not outsmarted. It was a particularly dark night. This helped us as the Syrians did not use their night vision properly and didn't notice how few tanks the Israelis actually had.

At one point an Israeli tank commander whispered over the radio to his colleague who was parked right in front of him to turn off his red braking light because the enemy could see it. The other Israel tank commander replied that his lights weren't on. The other insisted they were on, right in front of him. He replied, no, I swear we are in the dark. That's when the other tank commander realized he had somehow ended up in a line of Syrian tanks. He quickly loaded his shells and blew up the tank directly in front of him, the ones to his left and to his right, then quickly retreated. These Israeli soldiers, 18 year old kids, were frightened when the commander came over the radio again and again – shouting they must defend the line. “there is no one else to save us, we must stop the enemy, go forward together and win”. With extreme bravery they deceived the enemy into thinking they had more tanks than they actually did. They held the line all night until reinforcements were called up from around the country. As we walked out on the site of the battlefield, and saw the remains of the actual tanks from that battle, we were reminded again of the miracle that Israel survived that attack at all.

We visited the Hurva synagogue, once Israel's largest and most magnificent shul's. It was originally built by a group of Ashkenazic Jews who left Poland by way of Italy and Turkey in order to reestablish their old shule in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem. It was built in 1700, burnt down by the Arabs in 1721, rebuilt in 1816, destroyed by the Jordanians in 1948, then burned to the ground during the Six-Day War, leaving nothing behind but a high arch. For years I used to come with groups and say, look at that beautiful arch, that used to be the Hurva synagogue. Hurva means destruction.

Miraculously, within the past 5 years, money was raised to finally restore it to its former glory. Now it has an arching high domed roof, from which you get the most magnificent view of Jerusalem. Inside people study and pray daily. In the basement they restored the ancient centuries old foundations, located beside 21st century air conditioning units, the old and the new side by side. Yet they still call this magnificent feat of architecture, the Hurva – the destroyed synagogue, the name by which everyone knows it, to remind us of the miracle that it is still here at all.

We are the people of miracles. Yes we're smart, resilient and persistent but it doesn't hurt to also believe in miracles.

I don't think it was merely luck that the syrian tank didn't see where he was going
that the British soldiers didn't notice the bullets made beneath their feet
that the Roman generals let one wall escape destruction.

That those Jews found a new spiritual home in the mountains of Tzfat
Each time we found a way to survive.

We have this inner toughness in our Jewish DNA. Israelis are called Sabras, a fruit that is unique to Israel . It has a hard prickly outer skin that's tough and hard to break, but inside it's soft, sweet and mushy. That's Israel, tough on the outside, sweet on the inside.

I think in many ways we are all like Israel. Each of these stories of resilience and rebuilding can apply to our own lives. All of us can think of a time when we felt destroyed, when we were beaten down, and felt defeated. Whether due to an illness or a crisis, we have all known a feeling of despair or hopelessness. Not because of a national emergency or a war but often a small battle, a difficult obstacle. At this time of year, we reflect on the obstacles in our life. The times that we feel we are up against the wall. Now is the time to search for that spark of Jewish toughness. We have the capability deep down to survive and to flourish. It's in all of us, we just have to find it . Never say that the way is blocked, we can always find some way to get past. To resist we are beaten down, find a way back up and rebuild.

Let us take heart from the stories of our people in Israel who never let go of hope.

Whether it was Abraham leaving his family and founding a new people.

Whether it was Moses and our people searching for a homeland.

Whether it was our ancestors returning from the destruction of our holiest sites in Jerusalem.

Whether it was our expelled communities in Europe starting over in the new world.

Whether it was our people re-establishing the state of Israel against all odds .

Whether it was a synagogue community finding the will and resources to restore a new building and reinvigorate their Judaism .

We have the strength, resiliency and perseverance to make it happen. Let us all dig deep and find it.

Shana Tovah!