

## **Send a Bubbie to Israel** **Rosh Hashana Evening 5774 – Rabbi Stephen Wise**

Like a lot of other young people at university, Rachel Gold never thought much about her Jewish heritage. Of course she visited synagogue a couple of times a year with her parents, spent a few Friday night dinners with them, attended a family seder every year, but once she'd had her bat mitzvah, she had basically lost touch with the Jewish world. Until, that is, she heard from a friend at school about a free trip to Israel. And that's how Rachel found herself in line at Hillel House waiting to fill out a registration form for some organization called Birthright. Ten days in Israel, free, and all you had to do was be Jewish. Can't beat that, thought Rachel. She even told Mrs Berman, news that seemed to rejuvenate her old bat-mitzvah teacher. It seemed to Rachel that Israel is all Mrs Berman ever talked about.

But then Rachel started having some nagging doubts. Did she really want to spend 12 hours in a plane with people she barely knew? It is the Jewish homeland but does it have to be so far away. On the other hand the trip's free and people who'd been there said it was great. But she read about terrorists there bombing buses and settlements. But on the other hand she remembered the words of Mrs Berman, "Kinderlach, you must visit Israel. It's your duty as a Jew. You'll see and hear things that will stay with you for the rest of your life". (RH theme music here)

Mrs Berman's life had been difficult, but also typical of so many older Jews that Rachel had met. Born in a tiny shtetl in Poland, Mrs Berman was arrested by the Nazis, sent to Auschwitz while still a young woman, and somehow survived. When she came to Canada she became a teacher who always told her students, "To have a homeland for the Jewish people will ensure that we Jews will never again experience the tragedy of the Holocaust".

Now Rachel decided it was time to tell the most important man in her life about the trip, her father.

"Hi dad", said Rachel on the phone, "guess what. I may be going on a free trip to Israel. Pretty cool, right?"

Her father could barely sustain the excitement in his voice. His daughter was finally going to do something Jewish.

"Wow", he replied, "a trip to Israel. And free. Sounds ok. I think you should give it a try."

"You're not nervous about me going overseas, are you, with all those terrorists and stuff?"

"Listen, its safe and its beautiful and I think you'll love it.

"There are so many students applying I might not even get accepted".

"All you can do is try", her Dad said gently.

A few weeks later Rachel got an email. She'd been accepted! She was going to Israel! Rachel couldn't wait for the school year to end and for summer to begin. A free trip overseas. Maybe she could extend it and go to Greece or Italy or something.

The day finally arrived. Rachel travelled to Toronto to meet her group at the airport. She knew a few, met others and they all bonded quickly. It almost didn't matter where they were going, they were all looking to have a great time. Finally the El Al plan took off and landed at Ben Gurion Airport. From Tel Aviv they travelled around from city to city, each night at a different hotel. Their guide seemed to be intent on constantly pointing out some old ruins and rocks, which apparently had been there a long time. She learned about how the Jewish people survived despite being attacked and slaughtered by Babylonians, Greeks, Crusaders, Romans and Arabs.

Talking to her friends at a bar one night, she explained, "It all happened so long ago. Sometimes the stories they

tell are so unreal. Did that tunnel really save those people? Did the British really not notice a bunch of Jews underground. It's hard to believe”.

Her friends agreed. “It's a great trip, but its hard to know what this all means to us.” Another chimed. “As far as I'm concerned this country is a happening place. It's hot, beautiful, and fun. Let's just enjoy it.” And they all did.

(END OF PART 1)

One day, the bus pulled into what looked like an old prison camp surrounded by wooden fences topped with barbed wire. The sign said Atlit. Great, thought Rachel, another history lesson. They got off the bus and followed the guide into a long barracks with beds packed in side by side. They barracks had been restored to what they had been like in 1946, when Jews had tried to get Israel after the Holocaust. Unfortunately the British had still not decided what to do about Palestine so, as Jews desperately came over boat by boat illegally, they had to put them somewhere while decisions were made. This was one of those detention camps.

Their guide, an older lady, began talking quietly. “Welcome to Atlit, my name is Sadie. I was 8 years old when I got here. This was my bunk. You can see here I carved my name into the wooden wall, I wasn't sure I would make it out of here.”

There was complete silence. Did she just say she actually lived in this camp? And almost died here. Rachel moved to the front of the group to see the old woman better.

“I came here by boat from France, along with hundreds of others crammed in. We barely had enough to eat or drink. The boat had no beds, it was not meant for people, just some old freighter that was stripped bare and crammed full of us refugees who had nowhere else to go.”

“Didn't your family help you?” Rachel asked.

“Family? I'm sorry to say my dear, I lost my family in the concentration camps. I came here alone. I was born in Opatow, and my parents sent me away to live with a Christian family in Warsaw. We sent letters back and forth for a while, but they were eventually sent to the Ghetto and then on to Auschwitz.

Rachel was entranced by the story.

“I'm so sorry. What is your name again?”

“Sadie, Sadie Opatow. A lot of us from Opatow have the word in our name. Now if everyone will follow me I'll show you what we did when we first entered this camp”. She led the way to a large building with a wall down the middle covered with shower heads.

“Here is where they took all our clothes. They put them through these machines to clean them, most of us were quite dirty. Then they sprayed us with DDT to kill all the lice and bugs. We women were on this side as we showered in a group. The men were on the other side”

“I can't believe this” Rachel exclaimed, “you survive the Holocaust and the gas chambers and the British make you shower in this camp again. It's so cruel”

“It was my dear, it was. But these showers had water, not poison gas, and I remember it was quite nice to be clean. They gave us all clothes, not prison wear, regular clothes. See, here are some samples, look at these pictures on the wall”

The group came closer and inspected groups of Jewish refugees, most looking lost and bewildered. Here they were finally out of Europe, in Israel, but again behind fences. There were pictures of them standing looking

through the barbed wire, waiting to get out.

Sadie continued with the tour. "Please follow me, this museum has an actual boat farther on the grounds. It was brought from Austria and closely resembles the boat I traveled on. We can board it, there is a movie inside about the journey and I can tell you it is quite accurate".

Rachel could not believe it. This woman knew everything about this place. She actually lived here. She was on that ship, she slept in that bed. It was all so vivid.

Finally Rachel blurted out, "How did you finally get out of here?"

"We had a secret weapon the British never counted on. Hutzpah. They thought we would just sit around till we were released. But we didn't just sit around, we decided to break out of here, with the leadership of the Haganah!

"Who?" asked Rachel.

"Jewish fighters", replied Sadie calmly. An organized Jewish paramilitary group trying to bring Jewish refugees here to Israel and force the British to leave so we could have an independent country"

"But how did they do it", Rachel exclaimed, "with guard towers and high fences".

"It was incredible" Sadie confided "come here everyone and I'll tell you."

Sadie proceeded to explain how the Haganah had some of their people sneak into the camp as though they were refugees. From the inside they held small meetings, planning the night of the big escape. The word got around the camp, that on the night when the moon was smallest, and there was barely any light, the southern fence would be cut and they were all to run.

"I was amazed" Sadie said, "here were these incredible Israeli young men and women, barely 18 or 19. They were organized, they were in shape, they were smart and fearless. They organized us into groups, taught us the signals and made plans. At the signal, we ran out through the hole they cut in the fence and directly towards the water, then north up the beach. There were trucks among the dunes that took us to safety among about a dozen kibbutzim across Israel waiting to take us in. I wound up in Kibbutz Keturah, where I still live to this day."

Rachel walked away in a daze. Suddenly all the stories she had heard and learned about became clearer. This was all real. This woman was actually there, a prisoner in this barracks. Each part of Israel she had seen contained stories of her ancestors who actually lived through it. Rachel kept to herself the rest of the day.

The next day they all went to Yad Vashem . Rachel entered the children's memorial, where a few single candles are reflected through hundreds of mirrors to create over 1 million points of light, the number of children murdered in the holocaust. She began to cry at the thought of all those innocent children.

The last few days of the trip were a blur, seeing sites where Jews struggled to fight for independence, whether it was against the Romans or Greeks thousands of years ago, or against the British or Arab armies over the past few decades. It was a struggle for survival, and here she was, a Jew living in Canada who never had to fight for the right to be Jewish. She took it for granted that there would always be a state of Israel waiting there for her whenever she needed it, a homeland for all Jews, a place that others had fought for so she had the right to live safely as a Jew. (END OF PART 2)

Rachel was very moved by the trip. When she finally returned home, after seeing her family and friends, she knew she felt the need to visit her old synagogue. She wanted to tell Mrs. Berman about her trip. She especially wanted to tell her about meeting Sadie.

“Mrs. Berman”, she asked, “do you remember me?”

“Of course Rachel, I never forget my students, “Mrs. Berman said, “come to my classroom, I’m just setting up for the year”.

“You were right about Israel, it’s so beautiful and amazing. I can’t believe the Jews actually made it through the years, it’s like a miracle”

“It is, my dear”, said Mrs. Berman.

“Hey, that poster, that’s the western wall, we were there. And that’s Tiberius, we were there too. I’ve been to all these places”, exclaimed Rachel.

“Mrs. Berman, what was your favorite part of Israel?”

“Oh my dear, I’ve never actually been there”.

“What!?” said Rachel.

“It’s true”.

They chatted for a while longer. Leaving, Rachel promised to visit again over the high holydays. Then she walked towards the Rabbi’s office.

The Rabbi happened to be in when Rachel knocked on the door.

“Rabbi, can I come in?”

“Of course Rachel. How was your summer in Israel?”

“It was so incredible. I guess some of those things you guys taught me over the years sunk in. I want to go back, but its expensive, and this birthright trip was free”.

“That is true. It’s not cheap but so worthwhile. There are lots of programs and scholarships for students who want to travel to Israel to study or work” the rabbi said.

“Actually I was thinking of something else. How come Mrs. Berman has never been herself?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I would imagine being on her own and with a limited budget she just might have never had the means for such a trip”.

“Rabbi, isn’t there a congregational trip right after the high holydays. What would it take to send her this time?”

The rabbi paused, then asked, “Do you think you could raise \$4000?”

Rachel was silent for a moment as she thought and stared out the window.

“I was given a free trip, its only right that Mrs Berman have one too. I’m going to try”.

“I can give you a list of all your fellow classmates over the years at religious school and youth group”, said the rabbi, “They might be willing to help you”.

Rachel went home and called a few friends from temple. Then she went online and created a crowdsourcing site called “Send A bubby To Israel”. She described Mrs. Berman and her lifelong goal to get to Israel and asked young people who had been on Birthright to make a small donation so another could go on the type of trip they

did. It started slowly but a few people made small donations, \$18 from some guy in Oregon, \$36 from a woman who had gone on Birthright and now lives in Winnipeg. Slowly the total rose.

The Rabbi helped by giving a sermon on Rosh Hashana about Israel and how great the shul trip was going to be. Then the Rabbi did something unexpected.

“I have heard of Rachel’s campaign to send a Bubby to Israel” she announced “and on behalf of Temple Shalom I would like to contribute the first \$500 to send Mrs. Berman to Israel. Consider it professional development. You have inspired our children to love Israel for so long, now its your turn to go”.

Rachel was ecstatic, and realized her goal was in sight. She needed to get the money quickly as the trip was leaving soon. This was what Judaism was truly about, doing something for others. That was what the rabbi’s sermons were always about, helping the community. She had always had things done for her, now it was her turn. Her excitement grew as the donations kept pouring in until, just after Yom Kippur ended, she was able to tell Mrs Berman her dream was coming true, she would be going to Israel on the synagogue trip.

Mrs. Berman was overjoyed. Tears fell down her face. Her dream was finally coming true. She left shortly after that. As part of their itinerary, the Rabbi had scheduled a visit to Atlit. As the group got off the bus and entered the visitors centre, Mrs. Berman caught a glimpse of their tour guide. Her mind reached back into the memory of her childhood growing up in Opatow. She looked carefully at the older woman and approached her.

“Hello, my name is Mrs Berman. I feel like I know you, from when we were children. Are you from Opatow in Poland.”

Sadie looked up and had a faraway expression in her eyes. She looked closely .

“Fanny....is that you?”

The two embraced. And because a young girl figured out why being Jewish was important, these two women, having survived on two sides of the world, were finally reunited. The circle was complete.