

## **High holiday sermon about Israel – Rosh Hashana**

I'd like to start with one of my favorite moments from Israel this summer. Since I'd arrived in Israel earlier, I was waiting at Ben Gurion as 25 people from Shaarei-Beth El disembarked from the airplane. For those who have not been there in a while, there have been some notable upgrades. In the old days, the airplane would come to the terminal but there was no jetbridge. Instead, you disembarked by walking down an old school staircase onto the tarmac. Then buses would pick you up and transfer you to the main terminal building. The one benefit of this arrival procedure, was that when you got off the staircase on flat ground, you could stop and kiss the ground right as you arrived. Kiss the tarmac. Sure, it was probably dirty and often steaming hot, but that was the tradition and I remember doing it myself years ago when I went for the first time. Now, however, there is no staircase. You get off the plane via the jetbridge, go right to customs, and then baggage. You never even see the ground.

To be honest, I wasn't really thinking about this when our group approached, but, of course, that was Bonnie Hyett's first question as she came off the plane and saw me at the welcome area: "Rabbi, where do we kiss the ground?" I looked around in a panic. They'd come right into the building. What to do? Kissing the terminal didn't seem like the right idea. Nor did pressing our lips on the parking lot beside the bus. I thought about this conundrum for a moment; what would make the ideal spot? I made an official rabbinic decision. Since our first stop would be the beautiful Tayelet park overlooking Jerusalem, we would kiss the ground there. And so we did. Larry happily recorded this special moment with his camera. This

was the first of more than 2,000 pictures he took over the two weeks. Not to worry, he has since culled it down to only 1,000 and plans to make a photo book for everyone to see.

What is it about Israel that makes us want to kiss the ground the moment we step off the plane? We are so excited to be in our holy land. The Rambam wrote a unique halacha saying: "Great Rabbis would kiss the ground of Eretz Yisrael, and kiss its stones as well as roll in its dust." The Talmud also records that Rabbi Abba would demonstrate his great love for the Land of Israel by kissing the rocks of Acre as he returned to the Land. Indeed, Rebbe said that the air of Israel is holy in and of itself, and "the air of the Land of Israel makes one smart." As soon as we enter Israeli airspace, therefore, we can blow a kiss to fulfill the age-old custom, and breathe in the wisdom.

There is something in the air, a magical feeling that makes your skin prickle with anticipation when you finally arrive in Israel. People cheer as the plane lands because they are so excited! I know it's strange, but I even love going through customs. This time, the officer looked me over and asked, "are you the leader of the group?" "Yes," I answered. He smiled, stamped my book, and said, "thank you, Bruchim Habaim welcome"

As we rode on the bus to Jerusalem, I was struck by two distinct sides of Israel--modern and ancient, side by side. The road we were on, for example, was

freshly paved. It had just been expanded from 2 to 3 lanes, greatly reducing traffic jams. Our well-informed guide, Ron, pointed out how the marvel of technology led to new bridges being paved and the ability to widen the tricky windy roads going up the Judean mountains. At the same time, he pointed out that we were passing Modin. Evidence shows that people have lived there for about 3,000 years, when people rode to Jerusalem by donkey. Ancient and modern roads interwoven through the fabric of Israel.

As we continued zooming along the road, Ron pointed to burned-out shells of trucks lining the pavement. These are memorials to the Israeli's armoured carriers that tried to break the Arab blockade of Jerusalem during the 1948 war of Independence. At the time, the arabs owned the heights and shot down at the vehicles as they slowly climbed the steep roads. Most of these vehicles have been left in the same condition as they were the day they were attacked, 67 years ago. Fortunately, Israeli soldiers found back roads to Jerusalem and won the war. This road has been in Israeli hands since then. All of this history, we learned in the first few minutes of our trip.

There were three moments that made this summer's trip particularly meaningful. The first highlight was the purpose of this particular trip. Though I can proudly say this was my bar mitzvah trip, meaning this was my 13<sup>th</sup> trip, in fact, this was the bnai mitzvah trip of 5 young adults of our congregation. Rachel Hamburg, Josh Freeman, Julia Hyett, Raquel Weinstein and my own son, Jacob.

Even as I say these words I'm getting emotional. In my dreams I had hoped one day to take my children to Israel and read the torah at our holy sites and now this had actually come to fruition.

Jacob actually did two bar mitzvahs. The first one was a week earlier with his first cousin, my niece Emily. We held a service with our families and in-laws at the Kotel. As many of you know, the kotel is divided into two sections, one for men and one for women. This is not a synagogue. For thousands of years, Jews wept, celebrated and prayed at the wall in groups without being divided by gender. Since the 1960's, there has been a controversial division. For many years, there was an accepted status quo, but women continually felt marginalized because they could not pray with the men. Men did not feel comfortable hearing women's voices. Women could not have the torah at their section either. For decades, a group called Women of the Wall have been fighting for equal rights at the kotel. They have monthly services where they sneak in tallitot and a torah and have a full torah reading.

While it seems unusual that in the state of Israel women don't have equal prayer rights, the tide is slowly starting to turn. The Israel supreme court has ruled it is unconstitutional to prevent women from praying. However, the religious authorities who run the western wall plaza are still unwilling to bend on this issue. Although I love Israel, there are moments when I find it frustrating that things aren't as they could or should be. This is one of those situations. I find it insulting that, as a man, I can walk around the kotel area and walk up to the wall with plenty

of room to myself, while women are forced to cover up their hair and shoulders and legs and squish into the women's side that is 1/3 the size of the men's.

For this and many other reasons, we decided to hold the bar mitzvah for Jacob under Robinsons Arch, otherwise known as the Davidson Centre. When you picture the kotel plaza, it's important to remember that this is only half the western wall. Beyond the women's section, there is a bridge leading up to the dome of the rock. Here, the other side the wall continues, but doesn't have an easy to access plaza. Still, it is undeniably holy and beautiful. In fact, I think it's better. You don't have ultra religious people telling you what to do. It's not crowded and busy. Men and women can pray together. It's partly shaded in the morning. And you can reserve a spot with a table and a torah scroll. On the morning of our reservation, we came to Robinsons Arch, and it was a pleasure. There were, of course, at least a dozen other bar and bat mitzvah happening that day, between the two sections. After all, it was a Thursday torah reading day in the summer – high season.

It became quite a scene. We just walked in but others had arranged for a procession to march down to the kotel area, complete with drummers, shofar blowers, balloons, floats, dancers. It reminded me of a Disney parade. We made our way to our reserved space and discovered giant building block stones scattered on the ground. These are unique to Israel and have been left as they were found by archeologists over the past decades. The actual street level, from roman times, has also been uncovered, many metres lower than the western wall plaza. We were on

this level, the same level as our ancestors when they walked these exact steps. As Jacob and my niece Emily sang their torah portions, all around us we heard the clear and strong voices of other 12 and 13 year olds chanting, their words echoing off the walls, living testimony that Jewish tradition carries on and can never be silenced.

The main bnai mitzvah celebration with the group of 5 happened on a Friday morning, the day after our group arrived. At Masada. There were two options. You could catch a 4 am to arrive at Masada at 5:30, with an hour and half to hike up the snake path and watch the sunrise over the desert. I strongly believe this is something everyone should try. It's quite a feat. It's hot and it's steep but making it to the top gives you a real sense of accomplishment. The second option was to arrive at Masada at 8 am and take the cable car. This might be considered the more sane option. Either way, we all met at the top at 8:30 am and our guide Ron took us around this powerful and breathtaking site. Let me stop for a moment and tell you about Ron.

I've been to Israel many times. I've listened to many guides. I've listened to many teachers. Many of us on this trip had been on guided trips. But we all agreed that Ron Singer was the best guide we'd ever had. From the moment he met us, he was full of energy and enthusiasm. His laugh was contagious. He is Israeli who speaks great English but with some unusual phrases that always had us laughing.

Whenever the day began, he yelled out, "Be Excited," forcing us to put a smile on our faces. When he wanted to make a particular point, he often crouched down on

the ground and said, “listen to me.” Then, he explained his point. On Masada, he took us to a room and told us it was the bath house. Imagine this scene for a second. We are on a mountaintop in the desert. There is no water here. But King Herod wanted a bath so he got a bath. Engineers somehow figured out how to dig deep enough to catch runoff water during the few flash floods each spring. The water bubbled up the mountain into the bathhouse, that had been dug deep and plastered over so that water wouldn’t seep into the limestone. It was built with arches to avoid the steam rising and condensing on the ceiling and then dripping back down. There were even special vents so that fires could be built outside and the steam would enter the room to keep it the perfect temperature. Ron had three perfect words to describe such an ostentatious and remarkable engineering and architectural wonder – it was Un-Believe-Able. I will throw in some more Ron-isms throughout this sermon. I will use my special air quotes to let you know.

So, we were on Masada. After touring the site, we gathered in the synagogue. This was the place of prayer for the Jews who captured Masada in the time of the Romans. I think most of us know the story; during the revolt, the Jews fled here and held this stronghold for many years. The Romans took their time defeating every Jewish town from the north to Jerusalem and destroyed the Holy Temple. Eventually, the Romans made their way to Masada. They built a giant ramp over the course of many weeks and finally rolled up a giant ram and broke down the Jews’ defenses. But as the Roman soldiers entered the compound, they were surprised to find nobody to fight. The Jews had decided together to take their own

lives rather than be killed by the Romans, or worse, taken into captivity and sold as slaves.

Now, there we were, 2,000 years later, on the same spot where the Romans entered. And our children chanted the torah. The romans attempted to destroy our people, as many have tried over the centuries. But we are still here. We are proudly jewish, proudly wearing our tallit and kippah. We used a little torah that Bonnie brought from Oakville. It was given to Emma when she was consecrated at Shaarei-Beth El, and she carried it up the mountain like Moses. We will never be destroyed. The modern state of Israel is here to stay. And, as Josh Freeman was about to start his portion, two birds flew up to the railing behind him and began chirp.

Ron, a bird expert, could hardly contain his excitement. “Look at the birds,” he called out – “my dear friends, Chaverim, they are so happy they are singing with us”. I gathered the group of 5 youth in a huddle for a special prayer and blessing, and there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. This set the tone for the for the entire trip.

The second unforgettable moment occurred when we had Shabbat in Gedera. Gedera is not on most itineraries to Israel. It’s a typical small town, out of the way, about a half hour southwest of Tel Aviv. It’s a commuter town, settled by Jews who made Aliyah in the 1880’s to escape Russian Pogroms. Gedera is also atypical because it contains a Reform congregation started just 7 years ago by

Israeli's. The Reform movement took many years to gain a foothold in Israel. Most Israeli's are either religious or secular. Many didn't know there was anything in between. The slogan of the Reform movement is, "yesh yoter miderech echa lihiyot Yehudi" There is more than one way to be Jewish. What we take for granted is a Judaism that includes our ethics and morals, that allows for gender equality and creative prayers and celebratory music and beauty. The president of this is Adi Cohen. She lived in Texas for a few years while her husband was in school, and saw reform Judaism in action. She wanted to bring it back to Israel and was pleased to find that, indeed, there were over 40 reform congregations around the country. But there wasn't one in her home town of Gedera, so she started one. That was seven years ago, and when the congregation put up a poster for yom kippur, they sold out the hall they'd rented.

After a few years, they were able to hire a Rabbi, Myra Hova, another home grown Israeli trained in the Israeli rabbinic program of the Hebrew Union College, where I also went for a year. Adi has 4 children and all they've known is this congregation and their Rabbi. One of her children went with a friend recently to a bar mitzvah and came back to Adi and asked, "how come men and women sit separately, and why was the Rabbi a man?". You don't often hear these questions in Israel, and the words were beautiful to my ears.

Adi hosted Friday night services in her backyard the night we got there. Why? Because while there are a dozen orthodox synagogues in town, all paid for by the state, there is no building for the Reform congregation. They had to fight just to be

allowed to use the lobby of a nursery school. And this isn't even guaranteed. Adi called the school just to make sure their spot was available and was told, oh sorry, we forgot to call you but we are in the middle of a construction project and you can't use the space." Shocked and disappointed, Adi did what any synagogue president must do, she quickly emailed and called members to help and moved the Shabbat service to her backyard. Everyone helped, bringing chairs, tables, and the sound system. By the time Modi, our bus driver, figured out the new direction and pulled up in front of her house, the congregation was settled in as if they prayed there every week.

The sun was beginning to go down. We settled in on chairs and on the ground. Members of the congregation were so grateful and thankful that we'd come. They know groups don't always visit small Israeli towns or small congregations such as theirs. Just being there was what made it so special. Rabbi Hovav loved that we brought so many kids; theirs is also a young congregation with dozens of bnai mitzvah each year. At one point they, called up some young adults who were graduating high school. At SBE, we bless our children as they go off to College. But in Israel, it'd different. These young men and women are going into their compulsory army service. Their parents came up with their young adults and offered a different kind of prayer, that they stay safe and return home. It was very moving and reminded us of the types of lives the typical Israeli lives, with children in the army, constantly guarding her borders. Our smaller worries about grades and residence pale in comparison to these true life and death situations.

After we finished the Shabbat service, another congregant had our entire group to her house for dinner! It was potluck, the food was delicious, and the conversation even more satiating. It reminded me of our Shabbat services here in Oakville. I sat with a dad who had 4 kids. He didn't want to talk politics, or the economy. He wanted a regular conversation about our kids and swimming lessons. Larry Hyett talked to a soldier who talked about his recent mission into Gaza and what he experienced. There was a kids table, and after 5 minutes it was as though they were best friends. In fact, one young girl after talking to Emma, Julia, and Josh decided she would come to Camp George next summer. Shalom – Kaput.

I am so thankful we have twinned with Kehilat Yuval of Gedera – part of the domim program matching north American congregations with Israeli start up Reform shuls. I hope this is just the beginning of a long term connection between our two synagogues – regular visits, sharing educational resources, email pals among our students. I have promised them that the day they get an ark, we will give them Torah scrolls, since we have three and they have none. Who wants to go to Israel on that trip?

Finally, the third moment I want to focus on came towards the end of our journey. Every person on the trip loved our tour. We all connected in different ways. For some it was the food. I remember getting off the bus for lunch, and hearing Ron say: “lets attack the falafel stand”. It was a simple stand, at a regular corner, but had the most delicious falafel and shwarma. For others, it was the archaeological dig, going into a cave, digging with shovels, and actually finding pottery from

people who lived there 3 thousand years ago. For me, walking through Yad Vashem with Ron was one of the most powerful experiences I'd had. I know about the shoah, I teach about the shoah, and I've been to the museum before, but Ron walked us through and told us stories that set us on an emotional rollercoaster. He finished at the hall of records. Ordinarily, I would walk past, but he told us the story of a man who lost his family in the holocaust and never wanted to visit yad vashem or talk about it. Finally, he was convinced to go and he went to the hall of records to fill out a form for his sister so that her name would be entered in the database as someone who died and would be remembered forever. As he finished the sheet, he gave it to the office staff who began to enter the information when suddenly he realized that the sister's information was already recorded. Amazingly, she had filled out a form for her brother, for him. She had survived and was living in Israel. Even now, telling you, this story brings back powerful emotions. I walked out of the room in a daze and Ron gave me a big hug and I wept.

Each one of us had a moment, where we laughed or cried or our eyes widened in wonder and amazement. And that was when I knew everyone had connected to Israel in their own unique way. People started talking about what we didn't get to see, and how this was just a taste, and how they wanted to come back for more. I even overheard the kids talking about doing a semester of high school in Israel, or coming on birthright or doing a semester of University in Israel. That made my heart overflow, the fact that each person had developed a personal connection to

our Jewish homeland. We all want to return and solidify this relationship. The call will continue, bashana ha'ba b'yerushalayim – Next year in Jerusalem.