It was early 1967. The state of Israel was 19 years old, and life in Israel felt as precARIOus as it ever had. Whatever hopes that the new State of Israel would be welcomed into the Middle East had not been realized. Both Syria and Egypt were using increasingly disturbing rhetoric to describe their goal of eliminating the state of Israel. There were border skirmishes with increasing regularity. The question was not if war would come, but when. Israel was a place of hopefulness, but also a place of significant challenge. And this was to be the setting for Israel’s National Song Contest, to take place on Israel’s Independence Day in early May in Jerusalem. The various songs that would be entered in this contest had been written and submitted, but the contest organizers were concerned that there needed to be additional music to be played while the results of the judges were tabulated.

Songwriter Naomi Shemer was asked to write a song for the occasion. With her strong classical Jewish education, her song played on a Talmudic expression: in ancient times, a groom might present his wife on their wedding day with a golden diadem with an image of the Jerusalem skyline -- a Jerusalem of Gold -- Yerushalayim shel Zahav. (BT Ketubot 62b) This detail reflected that to the Jewish people, Jerusalem was not merely a city. It was a symbol of home, of the vitality of the Jewish people, and of hopefulness.

The verses of the song expressed both the physical and spiritual beauty of the city of Jerusalem, especially as evening approaches, while also alluding to the sad juxtaposition of Jerusalem’s proud past, and what she understood from a Jewish point of view to be Jerusalem’s disappointing present, with Jewish holy sites under control of the Jordanians, and Jews not allowed to go there. (Cont’d on next page)
When the song was performed fifty years ago - in May 1967, almost immediately before the Six Day War would break out in June - it became an instant classic. But not everyone was enamored of this song. Israeli writer Amos Oz took exception to Naomi Shemer’s depiction of Jerusalem as an empty city - a ghost town. It’s not a ghost town, he said; it’s full of people - it’s just that those people are not Jews. Jerusalem is full of vibrant life, just not a vibrant Jewish life - and we ought not render those people invisible, just as we don’t appreciate it when others render US invisible.

Another to critique the song was a young soldier and Kibbutz member, Meir Ariel. Just a few short weeks later, he was serving in the unit that captured the Old City of Jerusalem. Ariel knew that from the perspective of Jewish history this was a historic moment, and that the words of Naomi Shemer’s song were reverberating in people’s ears. And at the same time, how could there be anything elegant or elevated about his experience, as a soldier, amid the smoke and the blood and the ammunition and the dead and the abject ugliness of war (regardless that it was a war that was regarded as a sad necessity, as an act of self-defense, by the full spectrum of Israeli leaders on left and right)?!

Even before the war was over, Meir Ariel sketched out lyrics to a parody of sorts to Yerushalayim Shel Zahav - which he called ‘yerushalayim shel barzel’ - Jerusalem of iron and steel, with lead and darkness, of mortars and blood.’ It made reference to the tragic losses of war: ‘And one mother after another after another joined the community of the bereaved.’ When just a week after the war was over, there was to be a celebratory concert on the campus of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Meir Ariel’s unit mates encouraged him to sing the song - which he did, and surprisingly enough it became a minor hit and launched his music career.

1967 in Israel was the year of these two Yerushalayim songs: the original and the parody, the sentimental and the realistic. The song motivated by religious and national striving, and the song that did not shrink from describing the literal sacrifices necessitated by such striving. Jerusalem is golden, and Jerusalem is full of smoke. Jerusalem is a city that brings the heavenly to earth, and Jerusalem is a city that is no less earthly than any other.

Though so much has changed for Israel, for the world, and for the Jewish community worldwide, we who seek to have a relationship with Israel may continue to find ourselves caught right in between these two visions, between the ideal and the real.

There are numerous reasons why American Jews and Jews around the world are likely to feel connected to Israel. This synagogue, like almost all synagogues over the centuries, is oriented towards Jerusalem, both to honor the place that has been so sacred to our people and to acknowledge the historic pull that it has for us. It is the place where our people were born.

Throughout the centuries it was the only place around the world that Jews consistently could call home. And during the tumultuous 20th century, Israel was, for hundreds of thousands of Jews, the place that literally saved their lives. If you are an American Jew and you are of Jewish ancestry, you have relatives in Israel. It’s a question about how close these relatives are and if you are in touch with them, but that you have relatives in Israel is a certainty. Israel is the only place in the world where Jewish culture is normative, where the society can credibly claim to have a goal of putting Jewish values into action in the world on a national scale. And even if all these things were not true, Israel is quickly becoming the world’s largest Jewish community, which means that as time goes on, Israel will be much more the center stage for the Jewish people than the American Jewish community will, or anywhere else.
The sense of connection between the American Jewish community and Israel used to be absolutely automatic - but for a lot of American Jews, this connection between the American and Israeli Jewish communities is NOT automatic, and it’s necessary to be reminded of why anyone would think that Israel should play a significant role in an American Jewish life, why visiting Israel is important, and why the welfare of Israel matters to each American Jew.

And yet - at the same time, for Jews around the world and for Israelis, Israel can be a place of iron rather than a place of gold. It is a nation-state in a world where nation-states are usually not very admirable, to put it mildly. So I am glad that 50 years ago, Jews sang of both Jerusalem of gold and Jerusalem of iron. Some of the tension in the American Jewish community’s relationship with Israel can be explained as the dissonance between Israel as a holy place and as a real life nation-state. So often there is an expectation that Israel will conform perfectly to a vision of what a holy place will be like - and there is a sense of disillusionment when it does not achieve that ideal. But we have to ask: when is the last time that a nation-state DID achieve a dream-like state of perfection?

The Israeli writer Amos Oz wrote: “Israel is a dream come true. As such, it is bound to be flawed and imperfect. The only way to keep a dream intact is never to try to fulfill it. This is true of an initial vision for a novel, for a family, for a sexual encounter, or for planting a garden, and indeed for building a nation. Israel is flawed and imperfect precisely because it is a dream come true.” (In the Land of Israel, 259).

We had the extraordinary opportunity this past April to host two special visitors to our community: my cousin, Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, who lives in the Jewish West Bank settlement of Alon Shvut, and his colleague Antwan Saca, who is a Palestinian Christian living in nearby Bethlehem. Together they are among the leaders of the organization called Roots/Shorashim/Judur, which works to establish peaceful interpersonal relationships between Jews and Arabs living in the West Bank. Are they going to succeed in getting peace to break out tomorrow? Well, probably not.

Opinion polls consistently show that majorities of Israelis and Palestinians express that they want to live together in peace but are skeptical that what the other side wants. At the moment, the best thing we can hope for, in the shared opinion of right and left, is probably for a rebuilding of trust to even get to the point of negotiations. But whatever the future of that region is going to be, one thing we know for certain: it will be a better future when people - neighbors - from different sides in the conflict will be able to come together and see each other and listen to each other and to recognize each other’s humanity and to jointly commit to rejecting violence together. That is necessarily part of the process of creating a better future....

It is not only Jerusalem that is an amalgam of zahav and barzel, gold and iron, of the ideal and the real. We, too, have idealized and sometimes even sentimentalized versions of ourselves at our best, and most of us are experts at retaining those visions of ourselves at our best, even when we act at our worst. During these High Holidays, each of us has the goal and the task of confronting both the ideal and the real of ourselves, and taking the steps to move the real towards the ideal. Just as Israel is a dream come true, and is flawed as a result, so is that true of each of us.
Shana tova,

I’ve been the ritual chair here for a long time – for most of you it has never been any other way! When I first came to USH it was in response to a flyer I got in the mail about HHD services – my name was on a list the synagogue had bought. That first day I was invited to someone’s home for lunch. And so it began. It was a time in my life when I was “seeking” – I spent occasional weeks at an ashram and I started coming to services on Shabbat mornings – this is way back when Shabbat services were at 830 Hudson St. I hadn’t been to a synagogue other than to a family bar or bat mitzvah since my own bat mitzvah - which was, by the way, something like I wrote an essay and led a prayer on a Friday night.

So, one morning at services the president comes up to me and asks if I was Jewish and would I like to have an aliyah – I answered “yes” to the first but after a pause, declined the aliyah. So, I know how that is, or how it can be. As a kid I went to Hebrew school, I could still read Hebrew, I knew the brachot from hearing my brother practice way back when, but me have an aliyah? It wasn’t just that I had been taught that women can’t be called to the torah, although that may have played a part - but it opened up all kinds of other questions – Am I observant enough? Am I a good enough person? Who do you have to be to be called to the torah? So, I met with the rabbi, and it soon became clear that I was enough – I needed to be Jewish and to want to do it. That’s basically it.

So I took that first aliya and by the end of that first year I did my first haftarah. Over the years I learned more of the liturgy, I became kosher. The progression from where I was then Jewishly to where I am now is huge, but the thing is, it happened right here. The rabbi then taught me my first haftarah, a fellow congregant taught me the brachot, Joel Freiser taught me the torah service, a friend who was the educational director back then taught me trope. Rabbi Scheinberg has been teaching me to read torah, but he teaches me so much more than that - he’s a thorough, incisive and generous scholar, a guide, a sounding board, a friend, and I still bring my questions to the rabbi. I also still learn from my fellow congregants. My life has been profoundly changed over the time I’ve been coming to services here, being active in this community has become a significant part of who I am. We all find our own unique spiritual paths – what’s important is to have a path – to make a space to let God in. We have so many things vying for our attention it is easy for that to get crowded out.

I don’t know exactly when this one change started, it was probably one Shavuot, but a number of years ago I started holding out my hand when I stand at the bima before I do a haftarah or read torah – The rabbi is talking, I’m waiting, I’m holding out my hand to God like you would extend your hand to another
Karen Jurman said, "The Refugee Support Committee's event on October 6th was eye-opening. I had no idea that those seeking refuge in the United States can be subjected to detainment for months.

Sally Pillay, Program Director of First Friends NJ/NY, and Jill Singleton, Director of the Lighthouse, described their organizations' important work in supporting detained immigrants, including statistics on those being held in local jails as well as their awful conditions. Most detainees receive no visitors. Sally also described First Friends' advocacy work for recently released asylum seekers.

As a First Friends volunteer, Jill saw that recent detainees often had nowhere to go upon release. The Lighthouse offers temporary, home-like housing to asylees. Lighthouse guests spoke movingly about their reasons for seeking asylum and the events that led up to their being placed in detention. All described escaping war-torn countries in search of safety and better lives. Arriving in the U.S. from Syria, Chad, and Honduras, they were handcuffed and carted off to detention.

After services, we chatted over light refreshments in the sukkah. USH congregants conversed in Arabic with our Syrian guest; another spoke French with the Chad guest. The talks reminded us that we (or our ancestors) also made the journey to the U.S. for a safe and secure haven.

To volunteer with First Friends, contact them at info@firstfriendsnjny.org. To get involved with the USH Refugee Committee, please email Hope Koturo at hkoturo@hotmail.com.
My Jewish journey has its base in stories - sometimes fun and silly, sometimes sad and serious, but all retold so many times (and always with food) that they became permanently imprinted within my consciousness.

One of my favorites, which is best retold by my 97-year-old maternal grandfather, recounted the day he first met my grandmother in 1945. He had recently returned home to Belgium from Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and she was volunteering at the Jewish Agency after spending the Holocaust in hiding in the south of France. He came in to the Agency one day looking for assistance in obtaining a new bed, and it was my grandmother who denied him one since he already had a couch (limited resources being what they were). This led to my grandfather’s oft-used joke: “that’s why she has to share a bed with me for the rest of her life.”

Stories like this are part of my cultural identity as a Jew; and represent the foundation of the Judaism I’ve come to develop as my own. In my family, the cultural aspect of who we were as Jews was most important. My mother emphasized to me the community of a common background, which is what helped Jews survive as a people for so many years. At one point after moving to NJ when I was 7, we changed synagogues 3 times in 6 years in search of a congregation that felt like a community - not just a place for worship and study.

In early adulthood finding a firm place in a Jewish community took a backseat. Like many I wasn’t settled in one place for long and the need didn’t exist. Lindsay and I moved to Hoboken in 2009 and joined USH in 2012, but to me I still didn’t feel like a part of the community. My kids were named at USH, they were starting LC classes, I’d come semi-regularly for Shabbat, and we’d volunteer to deliver gift bags on Purim, but I felt like an outsider. I was obviously still Jewish, but I was missing the community and the strong cultural pull that comes with it.

Fast forward to early 2016. I received an email inviting me to join the Sulam leadership program here at USH. It was a powerful experience for me, almost like a light switch being turned on. It seems so simple almost to be silly, but it helped to focus me. The community which I thought I was missing was right here in front of my face. I made wonderful new friendships. I realized how I could have an impact on the community, and how to let the community into my own life. I was also reminded that community is a two-way street - I needed to reach out to the community as much as the community needed to reach out to me.

Suddenly, it seemed easy. I joined the Mitzvah Day committee starting last year, helping the amazing Merry, Hope, and Melissa to execute our wonderful day of service. Thanks to all of you who participate and make it special. I feel like we continue to make it better, and it is inspiring to work with three wonderful women who care deeply about our immediate community and the broader world around us.

I also joined the NY NextGen Board of the US Holocaust Museum. It was a way to broaden my Jewish community, connecting with the grandchildren of survivors to help bring the mission of the museum to our generation and beyond.

This fall I was invited to join the Board of USH as a trustee. I feel there are stories to be made here - stories which will continue to build on my Jewish experience, and hopefully serve as the foundation of the Jewish experience of my children will one day look back on... either that or they’ll have plenty to complain about with their therapists someday.

Back to where I started - my grandmother did share her bed with my grandfather for over 67 years, until she passed away early last year at the age of 90. One of my favorite aspects of their marriage is that nobody ever heard him call her by her first time, it was always a term of endearment in French: “chérie- my honey” or “chou- my sweetie.”

I’m paraphrasing, but my grandfather described the creation of our family as “the fulfillment of an impossible dream.” He and my grandmother are responsible for launching the Jewish journeys of 2 children, 5 grandchildren, and 2 great-grandchildren (hopefully with more to come)- and the innumerable happy, sad, and silly stories that come with raising such a brood. ★
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The Wiegand Family

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Everyone has a story. And maybe Jews have more than most. Jews have been scattered around the world in a diaspora for thousands of years. As a result, many of us have unique stories of people in our families, who have lived, traveled, suffered and thrived in all kinds of ways in communities in other parts of the world and throughout the United States.

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We will have at least one story in every issue of the Shofar.

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