

Turning the Heat Up (September 2008)

It's three o'clock in the morning. In Israel. My body tells me I should be exhausted, but my soul can't sleep. Deep in the wilderness of the Negev, in a guest-house at Kibbutz Yahel, the air conditioner steadily churns out its redemptive salve to offset the desert's heat. It was 104 degrees this afternoon. I floated in the Dead Sea.

There are fourteen members of Ner Tamid on this 10-day pilgrimage; for nine of us it's the first time. Organized by ARZA (The Association of Reform Zionists of America), the opportunity to visit Israel on their "Reform Family Experience" became instantly attractive when we were unable to put a trip together on our own. And the price was right. It wasn't long into our journey, however, when the subtext of the program became clear that this was more than just a chance for American Jews to travel to the Holy Land. Hidden somewhere in the program's marketing was the word *aliyah*, the Israeli term for immigration. The tip-off came on the first night when two of the three speakers thanked us for considering moving to Israel.

Oops.

To be honest, I don't think any of the 36 travelers (the other twenty hailing from Texas, Virginia, Maryland, New York, Vermont and New Jersey) came with any such intent. It was just a cheaper trip (by \$1000 per person). For that kind of savings we would be willing to indulge virtually any kind of sales pitch. But then I got to thinking. How often have I thrown out that letter from the land development company offering me free room and board (and even some spending money) if I would just be willing to come out and listen to an afternoon of "encouragement" about some time-share property?

Earlier this evening we toured the kibbutz. Our guide, Ron Bernstein, is a Jew with a pronounced New York accent who made *aliyah* thirty-one years ago. He spoke about the challenges of uprooting and embracing a radically different life-style. (The Negev is a long way from Long Island.) And the truth is, his spiel was no different from any other diaspora Jew I have met who decided to take the plunge. They are all here for one reason—they believe in this place.

Ask yourself, where else do people choose to live because of ideology? We might decide on a particular neighborhood because it reflects our values. We might move to a different state for reasons of comfort or health or lifestyle. We might uproot ourselves and our families and settle in a new land for the opportunities offered. Like all creatures, we tend to gravitate to pastures that offer the best grazing.

But Israel is different. Jews come here because they believe in this land. They believe in its promise. They believe in its people. They believe in its vision, its purpose. They come here not for convenience, not because it complements their life-style, but rather because it gives meaning to their lives. In many instances, it literally saves their lives. Jews make aliyah because it completes their sense of self.

Israel is the only place I have ever been where the residents routinely address and struggle with why they exist as a state, with how they can remain true to their nation's ideals and dreams. Israel is the only country I know of where citizens wax existential about their nation's *raison d'être*. This country, for all its flaws and failings, still inspires idealism.

Not to worry. I'm not writing this message in order to encourage you to consider making aliyah (although supporting those among our people who do is *mitzvah*). But what I am challenging you to do is to ask yourself when was the last time you made a choice based on "belief"? When was the last time you decided to do something (or refrain from doing something) because you hearkened to your soul (as opposed to your head)? Put another way—is my living consistent with the meaning of my life? For that matter, do I ever even think about truly giving meaning to my life?

The notion of believing has lost a good amount of luster in our day. It has tended to be associated with irrationality, superstition and religious fanaticism. To be sure, faith does not lend itself to rational scrutiny. Placed before a court of empirical inquiry, faith will invariably fail. But that's because the success-failure continuum from the religious perspective is less about proving oneself to others than it is about looking in the mirror. Am I who I say I am?

This is why we have Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is the purpose of these "Days of Awe". To ask the question: Is my life sufficiently of meaning to me that I even care whether or not I give it meaning? I have to say that those Jews who left their homes and lifestyles and

chose to come here are—for me—genuinely inspiring. They walk the talk. In their individual ways, they each embody an integrity of spirit that challenges me to ask myself—Am I living my life or is my life living me?

The rising of the morning's sun is announced by the lightening of the sky atop the mountains of Jordan. Footsteps and soft conversation can be heard outside my window as the kibbutz returns to life. The cows need to be milked. The date palms wait patiently across the road. Oblivious to the intermittent cars speeding down to the waters and attractions of Eilat, the Jews of Kibbutz Yahel confront—once again—the challenge of being human.

They say today will be even hotter than yesterday.