

I remember, as a young boy growing up in Buenos Aires, Israel was always a topic of conversation during family gatherings. Putting this in context, it makes a lot of sense. I grew up in a household where both my mother, Jerut, and my father, Moshe, embraced Zionism as an essential part of their Jewish identity. At that young age, I already knew that we had close relatives, my mother's cousin, who had made Alyiah with his family right before 1948, in anticipation of Israel's emancipation from the British Mandate. There were other family members, born in Eastern Europe, who, instead of emigrating to South America the same as their other relatives, as soon as they had a chance, they moved and settled in Israel.

Both my maternal grandfather, my mother's uncle on her mother's side and one of their close friends, all three of them, would regularly write heavily Zionist, pro-Israel, articles in what was then the more liberal local Yiddish daily newspaper.

At the same time, my parents were part of the founding group of the elementary school that I attended and they remained very involved with the leadership of this school. "Tarbut" School was one of the first Jewish Day Schools in Argentina. The huge innovation that this school introduced was the shift in the language used for Jewish education, from Yiddish to Hebrew. At the time, this was a very bold statement! Mine was one of the first schools, and one of the very few, where Jewish studies were taught in Hebrew and not in Yiddish. Due to this change, "Tarbut" School's leadership went out of their way to bring Israeli teachers for them to become a part of the school's faculty. The goal was for us to learn the language directly from people for whom Hebrew was their mother tongue. It certainly worked!

Fast forwarding a little bit, my older brother, my younger sister and myself, all three of us, spent significant time living in Israel. I have been in Israel many times and in different contexts. The first time I went it was as part of a Youth trip with educational goals. This trip was for teenagers involved in youth leadership (*hadrahah*). Then, as a young adult, I lead Jewish Agency sponsored groups, similar to what later on became Birthright Israel. A few years later, now as a Rabbi, I went to Israel as part of several Israel Bonds Rabbinic Missions. I also traveled to Israel leading several congregational missions and also with Bar and Bat Mitzvah families.

The time when I spent the longest in Israel was towards the end of my Rabbinic training, when I spent a full year studying in Jerusalem. That was in 1987, as part of the requirements towards Rabbinic Ordination.

No question about it, Israel occupies a very important place when it comes to defining my Jewish Identity.

I must admit that I am deeply saddened and disappointed to recognize that things have dramatically changed. I don't see the support from the Jewish Diaspora towards Israel as strong as it was when I was growing up.

I remember, very vividly, as a student in the last year of my elementary school, June of 1967, when the Six Day War broke out, we were in school, glued to one of those old transistor radio receivers, trying to get the last news from Israel about the war.

Israel has not been in a war like that one in many years, God forbid. But if this was today, I don't know if Israel would get the same undivided support that it got then from all of us, Jews and non-Jews alike.

A few years later, during the Yom Kippur War, 1973, many of my colleagues in our Youth movement, dropped everything, overnight, without hesitation, and rushed to Israel as volunteers (*mitnadvim*) to help during the war. Many of them never returned to Argentina. Once the war was over, they stayed in Israel and completed their college degrees in Israeli universities.

I am part of a culture where either you ended up in Israel or, alternatively, with very strong ties to Israel.

When did this whole Zionist Movement start?

Believe it or not, with this week's Torah portion! It is in this week's Torah portion, *Lekh Lekah*, where God commands Abraham to make Aliyah; 'Go forth, leave your place of birth, towards the land that I will show you.'

This week's Torah portion marks the beginning of Zionism! Abraham was born in the city of Ur, in Babylonia, but by following God's commandment he linked his future and the future of his descendants to the land of Israel!

In a remarkable fashion, a few years ago, the Israeli Parliament, the *Knesset*, sanctioned the strong connection between past, present and future. The *Yom Ha'Aliyah* Act, which was established by the *Knesset* in 2016, is celebrated on the seventh day of the Jewish month of *Heshvan* and coincides with this week's Torah portion, *Lekh Lekha*. According to the *Knesset* resolution, the aim of the *Yom Ha'Aliyah* holiday is to celebrate the development of Israel as a multicultural society and emphasize the importance of Aliyah to Israel.

We are Abraham's descendants, and, therefore, in the same way as Abraham linked his destiny to the land of Israel, our destiny is also strongly linked to the land of Israel. We are no different!

Regardless of what our place of birth is, as Jews, we have a strong connection with Israel and with the land of Israel. This connection becomes more alive when we use Hebrew, the language of the land of Israel.

May the study of this foundational *parsha* renew our desire to strengthen our connection with Israel and with the land of our ancestors.

Shabbat Shalom!

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