

Parashat Yitro 5772 – Reflections on My Visit to Israel

Rabbi Michael Safra

Shabbat Shalom. It has only been about 26 hours since I returned from Israel after a week with the Rabbinic Cabinet of Israel Bonds. It was really a fabulous trip – as is every trip to Israel – and I want to share a few thoughts with you this morning.

I landed in Israel at a time of religious tension. For years we have been preaching about the dangers of a politically powerful Orthodox Rabbinate and the important work our Masorti/Conservative movement does to build congregations and offer an educational and spiritual option for non-Orthodox Israelis who are looking to enhance their Jewish identities. In the last few months we have witnessed bothering and sometimes violent episodes, as well as demonstrations around the issue of *hadarat nashim*, relegating women to a second class – in Bet Shemesh and other places.

Before the Bonds Mission began, I visited Bet Shemesh – which is our sister city through Partnership Together – and I saw the hill known as Ramat Bet Shemesh Gimel, where thousands of apartments are being built exclusively for the Ultra-Orthodox. My guide from the Partnership, Brenda Granot, expressed to me her personal fear that the ultra-Orthodox are trying to take away the entire city. I want you to understand my mindset going in to this mission. I was a little disappointed with the way the religious dream of Israel had been playing itself out.

My trip reminded me how important pluralism is – and not just religious pluralism. There is nationalist pluralism as well. *There is no such thing as an authentic Jew; and there is no such thing as an authentic Israeli either.* Israelis are diverse – coming from the east and the west with a diversity of custom and culture. It is only recently that Israelis have started to value that.

A few examples:

For the Shabbat before the mission began, I stayed with friends – my mother's best friend from growing up in Jerusalem, Sara, and her husband, Shlomo. They still live in Jerusalem and they are incredibly hospitable. They define themselves as "*dati le'umi*", national religious, sometimes referred to as modern Orthodox. They take *halakhah* very seriously, and while they ask a lot of questions about what I do, they are not about to join the Conservative movement. They feel at home in Jerusalem, where their Orthodox lifestyle is "normal." Their friends wear *kippot*, almost all the food is *kosher*, the air-raid siren reminds them when Shabbat begins, and top-notch Jewish education is free. I enjoyed a very traditional Shabbat in the holiest city in the world.

After Shabbat I visited other friends in Karmeit Yosef, a beautiful neighborhood between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that many of Israel's secular business elite call home. Zvika and Lois met my parents when Zvika – who grew up in Tel Aviv – was studying at Emory University. Zvika

returned and Lois made *aliyyah* about 30 years ago. Lois attends a Reform synagogue on occasion, but the rest of their family is entirely secular. They feel much more comfortable in the high culture areas and fancy non-kosher restaurants of Tel Aviv than they do in poorer, religious Jerusalem.

On Sunday, as I said, I visited the religiously tense areas of Bet Shemesh. And on the ride back to Jerusalem, I began to wonder: Who is the authentic Israeli? And who is the authentic Jew? The truth is that nobody has an exclusive claim on authenticity. The Jewish people are diverse and the Jewish people are one.

Parashat Yitro describes how our people arrived at Mount Sinai. In the third month after they left Egypt, “ויסעו מרפידיים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויהן שם ישראל נגד ההר”, They traveled from Refidim and they arrived in the Sinai Desert. There Israel encamped near the mountain.” The Hebrew word for encamped, ויחן, is written in singular, while all the other verbs are plural, and Rashi explains: “עם אחד עם לב אחד”, When this diverse group encamped, they were a singular people with a singular heart.”

Unity is an underlying theme in the narrative. The word “כל, all” is repeated seven times, which is significant. And the most important verses says: “ ויענו כל העם יחדו ויאמרו כל אשר , דבר ה' נעשה , **All** the people answered together and said, **all** that the Lord has spoken we will do.” The people stood together, but I can't imagine that they were all the same. They were over a million people and they had to be diverse; but they had a unity of purpose. And that enabled them to achieve something great in receiving the Torah.

Israel Bonds missions are pre-occupied with infrastructure – because, after all, the bonds that you and I purchase are used for those kinds of big projects. So we visited the desalination plant in Ashkelon. This was the largest desalination plant in the world until Israel built a slightly bigger plant in Hadera. It is huge, and it desalinates over 300 million gallons of sea-water a year. The technology has been used on cruise ships for years, but in Israel it provides close to 15% of the country's drinking water, and the number will rise to 25% in about 5 years and 50 % in ten years. (Don't quote me on the numbers; but the point is that nothing even close to this scale has been tried before.)

We enter the plant and we are standing in front of a row of pipes about 25 feet high by 300 feet long, where the filtration process occurs. Our guide, Oshik, explains that the manufacturer recommends the filters be switched every 3 days. But there are 45,000 filters in that plant; you can't change that many filters so often and remain efficient. So what do they do? Well the Israeli engineers decided that since the water is purified by a row of 5 filters with the first filter catching the bulk of the salt and the fifth filter catching significantly less, they could switch the fifth filter to the front every few days and that will keep the filters fresh for over a year – kind of like rotating your tires. Now that's a *Yiddisher kopf!*

And then Oshik showed us an energy recovery device that recycles enough energy to make the desalination process feasible. This was invented by what Oshik called “a Russian genius”. Now you have to understand what it means for an Israeli-born Sephardic Jew to

praise a Russian Jewish genius. Twenty years ago the immigrants from the FSU entered the lowest rungs of Israeli society. They were literally sweeping the streets; and many Israelis considered their presence a burden. But now this particular Russian engineer basically ensured water security in Israel – a country of 7.5 million people living in an area that is more than 50% desert –through his innovation.

The Jewish people are diverse and we all have a hand in building the state. They build and innovate. We Participate through Bonds and visiting and supporting Israel. We are one people with one heart.

We also visited Shai Agassi's electric car facility Better Place, saw new excavations in David's City, and attended a by the Israeli Chamber Orchestra in Tel Aviv. On Tu B'Shevat we visited a religious and secular school that share the same building in Modi'in; we sang, danced, and planted trees. And we were diverse as well, with Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative rabbis visiting Israel together and recommitting ourselves to the future of our Jewish state.

While I was in Bet Shemesh I also met Orna Nachmani, who runs a program that brings girls during their years of national service to teach Judaism in secular schools. Her sister-in-law, Malka, visited B'nai Israel with the chefs' delegation two years ago; and Orna herself participated in Partnership delegations to Johannesburg and Washington. She described how these trips taught her what Jewish pluralism means.

Jews aren't *religious* or *secular*. Jews are a diverse people who conceive of their Judaism differently. A recent study in Israel demonstrated that 80% of the population believes in God. As the journalist Yair Lapid pointed out, there are clearly disagreements about what kind of God these 80% believe in. But we don't have to always argue those points. We can concentrate on our unity of purpose.

The director of the Partnership, Gideon Vennor, showed me a packet of 20 new program proposals that are seeking funding to foster pluralistic dialogue in Bet Shemesh. There are people who understand that the arguing and power-struggles are not what Israel is all about. The real Israel is a place where different kinds of Jews share a common purpose and destiny. *עם אחד עם לב אחד*, One people with one heart.

My message to you is that we, too, are part of that common destiny – not just because Israel is threatened by the specter of a nuclear Iran or the unrest of the Arab Spring. The State of Israel needs a unified, diverse Jewish people to complete the process of settling and building our only national homeland.

- If you haven't planned a trip to Israel recently, think about going again. I know Rabbi Schnitzer would be glad to take you this summer.
- If you haven't bought an Israel Bond recently, invest in Israel; help Israel fund its environmental entrepreneurs and engineering geniuses.

- If you haven't joined Mercaz – the Conservative movement's party to the World Zionist Organization – or you haven't contributed to Masorti, which strengthens Judaism in Israel through pluralism; if you haven't contributed to our Partnership with Bet Shemesh through Federation, make your pledge after Shabbat.
- Sign up to join 10,000 other supporters of Israel at the AIPAC Policy Conference here in Washington in March; I promise you won't regret it.
- And if you have friends or family in Israel, talk to them. Find out what they think about religion or politics or the future. Talk ... and listen as well.

These are all easy things we can do to make the point that we are part of the Jewish national destiny. We don't need to be Orthodox or politically to the right like my friends in Jerusalem. We don't need to be secular or politically to the left like my friends in Karmeil Yosef. We don't have to be like any other authentic Israeli or Jew; we are already authentic Jews and authentic Israelis if we link our own destinies to the common national purpose of the Jewish people.

ויענו כל העם יחדו ויאמרו, Let us answer the call together and say: "עם אחד עם לב אחד: We are one people with one heart sharing one destiny in one land." Shabbat shalom.