

Reflections on Traveling to Israel  
Shabbat haChodesh 5784  
April 5, 2024/27 Adar II 5784

Shabbat Shalom!

This Shabbat has a special name...Shabbat haChodesh, the Shabbat of the month. It is called this because during this coming week, we begin the month of Nisan. Nisan is the month in which we celebrate Pesach. There are special traditions for several of the Shabbats culminating in Pesach, a reflection of the importance of this month and this spring festival.

Passover is the festival of freedom. We know, of course, that the centerpiece is the seder, when we tell the story of going forth from slavery in Egypt...to Mt. Sinai and then to the Promised Land. It is a sacred time when we reflect on the possibility of redemption and revelation.

Even before I traveled to Israel last week, I knew that this Passover was going to be a unique challenge. How do we celebrate a festival about freedom when there are hostages being held?

The key, I believe, is built into the foundation of the holiday. The central part of the seder is what is called the maggid, telling the story. This is what we need to do as we consider the realities in this terrible war.

When I was in Israel, we visited what is called Hostage Square in Tel Aviv. This has become the focal point for many different kinds of gatherings in support of the hostages and their families. There are pictures and all different kinds of objects on display. Most prominently, many of you may have seen the pictures of the empty Shabbat table that sits in the center of the plaza. There is a place set for each hostage, imagining the day when they will come home and will once again be able to sit and enjoy a beautiful Shabbat.

I met a woman named Einat, the aunt of a young man named Alon Ohel. Alon is 22 years old, the same age as my son, and a gifted pianist. He was kidnapped from the Nova music festival and is still being held hostage. He went to dance and listen to music and hang out with his friends. And now, 6 months later, he still isn't able to come home.

Einat urged us to tell Alon's story, and made the suggestion that we leave a seat at our seder tables for Alon and the other hostages. At our temple seder, we will have an empty seat at each table, with a picture of one of the hostages. I encourage you to do the same at your seders at home, The pictures can be downloaded online at the [bringthemhomenow.net](http://bringthemhomenow.net) website.

I visited Kibbutz Kfar Azza, a tranquil and beautiful place that was the site of some of the most brutal attacks on October 7. I met a woman named Orit Zadikevitch. Orit is just about my age and has lived on the kibbutz her entire life.

She talked about her childhood and the freedom of going back and forth to Gaza, for shopping or the beach. She talked about her volunteering in recent years, going to the border and bringing Palestinians to and from the hospital for medical treatment.

And she told us about her husband who was killed and her friends who were killed and the young adults who were kidnapped out of their beds. I will never forget her voice telling us how they were taken literally in their boxers and pajamas!

Orit urged us to tell her stories. And this is what Passover is all about: telling the stories and imagining the possibility of achieving freedom and safety.

In some respects, Israel feels normal. I landed after a long flight, got a coffee at the Aroma Cafe, and our tour bus came and picked us up. The sun was shining and the spring flowers were blooming. I could see the blend of ancient and modern everywhere I looked.

And yet, nothing is normal. Every person I met was in pain, wanting to live in peace and feeling like a second War of Independence has begun.

I had dinner with a friend in Modi'in, as I do every time I travel to Israel. In two weeks, her son will be entering the army into an elite fighting unit. He had a medical exemption because of his epilepsy, and yet he trained and lobbied and urged to be admitted into this kind of military service. Why? Because five of his friends have been killed.

And my friends, his parents, are terrified.

I had a lovely Shabbat dinner with a friend. He told me that five young people from the neighborhood have been killed, and many more are in harm's way.

And his beautiful, passionate, 11 year old daughter told me...I want to help the country...I know how important it is. But I don't want to go into the army. Because I'm afraid that at some point in the future, another war will come and I'll be pulled away from my family into *miluim*, reserve duty.

I spent some time with the cantorial soloist from Kol HaNeshama, the Reform synagogue in Jerusalem where I love to pray on Shabbat. Boaz and his wife had a baby on October 10. And then he left for 54 days of reserve duty, in Gaza and on the northern border. And thank God he is home, safe and sound.

We met Rabbi Herzl Tubey in Sderot. He did exactly what I do before a holiday service...got to the synagogue early to set up and prepare. And he was shot in the chest by terrorists who had invaded his town. Remarkably, he survived and I bring home his story, with prayers for his continued recovery and good health.

This was an incredibly important trip for me, and I am grateful to everyone at the temple who made it possible for me to go. It reinforced for me that we need to do whatever we can to understand the pain and the fear of this moment.

While I suppose there is nothing that isn't political when it comes to Israel, we need to recognize and speak as loudly as possible about what happened on October 7: a brutal and vicious terrorist attack was launched against innocent civilians living peacefully in their homes, not in disputed territories but in the central part of what is universally considered Israeli land. They were sleeping after celebrating Shabbat and Simchat Torah.

None of it is about minimizing or ignoring the ethical challenges of this time. There are tragic things happening on each side of this war. Every Israeli I met wants peace and sees the distinction between the Hamas terrorists and the innocent civilian population.

In my view, especially now having spent this time there, this is a time to renew our connections with our brothers and sisters. At Passover, we are taught to see the story personally...in every generation, to see it as if we ourselves went forth from Egypt. I believe this same wisdom applies to this moment in time with the war happening in Israel.

As Passover approaches, we need to say that *we* were attacked. It is *our* children, *our* brothers and sisters who are being held hostage and *our* family that is in grave danger wearing the uniform of the IDF.

Israel needs us now. They need us to not look away...to tell the stories, to raise our voices, and to help ensure that Israel is not villainized for defending itself.

There is a beautiful anthem that is being sung across Israel. It draws on the words of Psalm 122:8. "For the sake of my family and friends, I pray for your well-being. For the sake of the House of Adonai our God, I seek your good."

Tonight as the day of peace begins and the festival of freedom approaches, may God bless us with the will, the wisdom, and the courage to create peace for all who live in the land of Israel. May this moment be the beginning of a time of freedom and renewed peace.