

A Bus Ride in Israel

*Erev Rosh Hashana 2002 - 5772
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I want to ask you an unusual question this evening. Have you ever ridden on a public bus?

As a child, I used to take the number 5 bus from Franklin Junior High School in Reisterstown, Maryland to mid-week Hebrew school. And I would sometimes take the number 5 or 7 to spend the day downtown with friends. It would wind through avenues and streets where I most definitely would not want to get off and wander around alone at night.

I dare say most of our children have not seen the inside of any bus other than a yellow school bus. That is a shame, because those journeys were a real eye opener for me. They taught me a lot about people and humility. One of the important lessons I learned was that not everyone had the same lifestyle I enjoyed growing up.

Perhaps those rides helped prepare me for the Eged bus rides I so enjoy in Israel. My first trip to Israel was in the summer of 1973, between my junior and senior year of college. I will never forget the contrast between the bus drivers in Israel and those I was used to back in Baltimore. The first thing I noticed was that the Israeli drivers all wore shorts, exuding and reflecting a certain informality which characterized the young nation.

The second thing I noticed was that they punch multi-fare cards, give out change as well as little slips of paper which accumulate in your pocket and are actually receipts, and play with the radio, all while driving.

I couldn't help but admire the brash bravado of the drivers who drive as if the road belongs to them alone, who may slow down ever so slightly if the road is particularly narrow, and who take turns and curves as if they are driving Ferraris or Corvettes.

With this introduction, you may appreciate the joke they love to tell in Israel about the bus driver and rabbi who die and go to heaven. Although the bus driver is admitted to heaven immediately, the rabbi is forced to wait some time before he is allowed in. The rabbi indignantly questions why there is such a disparity, and asks if there hasn't been some kind of mistake. The Holy One answers, "There is no discrepancy or error. Its really quite simple. Rabbi, when you prayed and were in your pulpit, everyone slept. However, when the driver drove, everyone prayed."

Passengers call out, "Rega", which means "Just a moment", as they rush to get to the door before the driver closes it and pulls off. It is almost as if everyone is in on a game. If someone is running to the stop to catch the bus, the driver may stop before pulling away, or he may slow down, or he may speed up. It all depends.

A sign in the front of the bus tells passengers to give up their seats for the elderly. Rather than just mundanely state that, however, the words carry extra weight, and contain a moral message,

for the quote is actually a passage from the book of Psalms, "Mipney seva takum, Rise up before the elders."

One night, during the summer of my first time in Jerusalem I took the bus to visit a friend. My Hebrew was not too good, but when I was the only one left on the bus, the driver asked me where I was going. It was late, and this was clearly the driver's last run of the day. After I told him my destination, he proceeded to pull into the terminal and park the bus. He motioned for me to follow him to the parking lot. I did not fully understand what was going on, but the next thing I knew, he had me jump on the back of his motorcycle, and proceeded to take me where I was going on his motorcycle.

From that moment on, I was hooked, and have had a love affair with Israeli buses ever since.

So imagine my dilemma this past July when I went to spend the month studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Friends, family and congregants had suggested that I not take buses, since they have been primary targets of Palestinian murderers over the past two years.

At first I did stay away from the buses, and refrained from traveling anywhere by bus. Slowly, but surely, however, I could resist no longer. After about a week, I had to go somewhere, and so I took the bus -- admittedly, with some trepidation and feeling of insecurity. I was on guard, suspiciously glancing at all who boarded. But by the next day, after that initial trip, I was more at ease, and so I purchased a cartisiya, a multi-fare ticket. It was a small, but conscious and deliberate statement. It was an act of faith and determination, as well as a recognition of the randomness of life and recognition that certain things about our fate are beyond our control.

One of the things which attracts me to the bus is that it is such a wonderful cross-section of Israeli society. There are young soldiers, both men and women, joking with each other. Young elementary school children, unaccompanied by parents get on and off, with ease and confidence. Teenage boys with hair colors which are not even in the rainbow ride together. Not far behind them are Hasidic Jews reading psalms, which may be the origin of the joke about the driver and the rabbi. A Russian immigrant couple, out on a date sits near a group of black girls, who if I did not hear them speaking beautiful Hebrew to each other, would not be out of place, based on their appearance in Anacostia or the inner city. Foreign workers from the Philippines sit carrying plastic shopping baskets. Some of the riders are on their way to work. Some are dressed fashionably, and some in the fashion of the 19th century. Some wear kippot and some do not. Some listen to walkmen with their headsets on, and some speak into their cell phones. There are lovers and loners. Some have tattoos on their arms, and some have numbers tattooed on their arms.

Clearly, the bus in Israel is truly pluralistic. It is Clal Yisrael. All aspects of society are represented here, which is precisely why it is such a favorite target of the Palestinian murderers and those who send them.

Ultimately, it is for this very reason I could not refrain from riding the bus this summer.

And it is the reason I speak this erev Rosh Hashana about such a seemingly benign topic, a subject which in reality sets the tone and touches upon the theme and core issues of these holy days.

First and foremost, as the sage quoted in Pirke Avot cautions us, “al tifrosh min hatzibbur: Do not separate yourself from the people.” My decision to ride the bus was a small act based on a choice not to exclude myself from the Jewish people. I hope you join me in declaring, especially in these difficult times that nothing can or should ever be allowed to cut us off from our people.

Furthermore, the imagery of the metaphor is poignant. Life is a journey. Beginning with this evening’s service, over the next ten days, we embark on a journey together, as individuals, and as a community. The liturgy of the Yamim haNoraim emphasize that we do not know where our lives will lead or take us. The prayers are intended to help us confront both our vulnerability and the randomness of life, just like the riders on the bus. In so doing, we are compelled to a greater appreciation of that which is truly meaningful.

And finally, as we begin these Aseret Ymei Teshuvah, the ten days of Repentance, it is my hope that you will reflect upon the importance of faith and courage as you begin any venture, but especially as you begin the journey of these days and of the rest of our lives.

May we take that path together, strengthened by our heritage and each other, and accompanied by the Holy One, Blessed be He, in all that we do.

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