

Passover in Israel @ 60

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The Torah says that people should make their way by foot to Jerusalem for the three festivals: Pesah, Sukkot and Shavuot. Several centuries later, the Mishnah and then subsequently, the Talmud reiterate and expand upon the mitzvah requiring people to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the holidays. In fact, those three days are called in Hebrew "regalim," from the word regel, meaning foot, to emphasize the connection and importance of making the journey.

Although I have been in Israel on several previous occasions for the holiday of Pesah, I must tell you, there was something unique about being there for Pesah this year. It may have been caused by the sense of anticipation and excitement over the upcoming celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel next week, or it may have been precipitated by the desire to try to enjoy some modicum of normalcy, or perhaps people wanted to fulfill the Biblical and Talmudic injunctions to rejoice on our festivals. Regardless of the reason, the city and country were full and teeming with visitors from all over the country and around the world.

Walking in the streets of Jerusalem, one heard the cacophony of languages – French, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Portugese, Yiddish, and of course English and Hebrew. I could not help but think as I saw and heard Jews from all over the globe converge on Israel for the holiday of the concept of Kibbutz HaGaluyot – the ingathering of the exiles.

In our daily prayers right before the shema we say, "Vehave'inu leshalom me'arba kanfot haaretz... Bring us in peace from the four corners of the world and lead us to our holy land". And in the daily Amidah we ask God, "Ve'sa nes lekabetz galuyotenu... Gather the dispersed from the ends of the earth so that all the exiles may be brought to the land of Israel." This in fact is part of the mandate of modern day Israel: to fulfill the vision of being the central gathering place of Jews from around the world.

We Jews in America often do not speak in these terms, for we conceive of where we live as the center of the universe. But throughout the millennia, Jews living outside of the land of Israel felt that they lived, not in the Diaspora, the word we use today for any Jew who lives outside of Israel. Rather, previous generations of Jews always used the more pejorative word, galut, meaning "exile." The implication is -- when in Israel, we are home.

Walking in the Old City during Hol HaMoed, the intermediate days of the holiday, the city was filled with bands and singing groups, as well as beggars and mystics. There were young people playing and running, darting in and out of lines. Elderly Jews, slowly walking make their way with canes along the cobbled stones. Secular Jews in tank tops passed by religious Jews in caftans, streimels and wigs wearing heavy black coats, and they almost brushed shoulders.

The politicians argued just before the holiday about the latest controversy – what was the meaning and application of a 1986 law banning public display of hametz during the

holiday. In other words, could stores be allowed to have bread products on their shelves, as long as they did not prominently display them in the front or outside of the store. A judge ruled it was permissible to do so. Incidentally, the judge was a religious, observant Jew who happened to be a woman. The ruling centered on the definition of a Talmudic, Aramaic word, pumbit. The Ultra Orthodox were furious, but even some non-religious, secular Jews objected to such an interpretation. Sometimes hearing some of the controversies that go on in Israel, you would think that Judaism was a brand new religion, Jews a people just getting started and Israel a country still trying to figure out its identity. It struggles to navigate the sometimes conflicting pulls of a modern secular country with the demands of an ancient religion subject to various understandings and with a wide variety of divergent practices as lived by an intensely passionate and deeply opinionated people – not an easy task, but part of what contributes to such a vibrant and exciting democracy.

Perhaps one or two images will help to describe and convey what it is like to be in the Jewish homeland for a Jewish holiday. The morning before the holiday began, the air was filled with the smell of fire emanating from public bonfires as people brought their hametz to public areas to be burned. In some neighborhoods, people lined up to dip into boiling water or blow torch their pots and pans for a small fee so their utensils would be kashered for use during the holiday. The day before Pesah I left a pair of pants at the tailor's to be hemmed. Going back the day after yom tov, to pick them up, I see a sign on the door, which was not there before: "closed for Hol HaMoed," the intermediate days of the holiday. Or most poignantly: Upon arriving in the airport, signs in the terminal greeted and welcomed travelers with the words, "Pesah Sameach", Happy Passover.

Some perspectives on the other side of the Atlantic of a few events that occurred while I was in Israel: Former President Jimmy Carter was up to his usual mischief. While he was busy meeting with Hamas officials, and telling of their desire for peace, their reasonableness, the sincerity of their interest in a ceasefire, Sderot continued to be subjected to shelling of kassam rockets, and Israeli guards at a checkpoint came under Hamaas fire. He really should go back to being a peanut farmer.

An elderly man in his mid 80's was arrested in New Jersey and accused of spying for Israel over 25 years ago. It was widely seen as an effort by those seeking to embarrass President Bush prior to his trip to Israel next week. One interesting article I read commented on the times Israel has uncovered American spies and just quietly expels them, in contrast to the way America deals with the issue.

At the same time the US Congress was being briefed on the Syrian – North Korean nuclear reactor Israel had bombed, there was a great deal of talk about secret negotiations being conducted with Syria, the timing of which may have been to take some pressure off of Syria for its support of terror.

It still astounds me that people say they are afraid to travel to Israel for security reasons. While you are there, as anyone who has ever visited Israel will attest, you have a tremendous feeling of being safe and secure. Parents extend more freedom to their children to play on their own, and feel far safer than we do here in Galut. But beyond

that, I just can never understand how people would allow terrorists to achieve the victory of intimidation they seek. How can we allow them to cut off the Jewish people from their homeland and deny the experience of being with our brothers and sisters living in Israel and seeing all the wonderful and exciting things there?

One of the many interesting people we met was the former mayor of Eilat, Raphi Hochberg, who we invited to join us and speak to our group for Shabbat dinner. He talked about some of the extraordinary things he did in the 1980's when he was mayor and Eilat experienced a tremendous growth spurt. Over 30 hotels were built while he was mayor, none since. When he was mayor, he convinced the government to turn Eilat into a tax free zone and give it all kinds of benefits to help it cope with the unemployment and economic hardships it was facing. He now is a businessman who uses a patent invented by Technion University to grow lettuce hydroponically, but many are urging him to come back and run again this fall. He told us of being rebuffed when he tried to do business with Jordanians, when they found out he was Israeli. Best of all was the story he told about being in Manhattan one day and seeing a sign for Kaplan Jewelers. He assumed they must be Jewish, and so he went in and asked to meet with the owner. He found out they had 200 stores around the country and manufactured their jewelry overseas. He persuaded the owner to come and set up his factory in Eilat instead, where he would receive tax benefits and have the satisfaction of knowing he had created jobs in Israel. As my son Ezra said, "Not bad for a cold call."

The specter of Iran looms large today. The Mullahs are behind much of the mischief in the Mideast, including the support of the forces killing American troops in Iraq, and funding support of disparate groups, such as the Shiite Hezbollah, as well as Sunni Hamas and Islamic Jihad, while it continues its march towards acquiring nuclear capability. There is a widespread feeling that something must be done to stop the constant shelling of Sderot. In fact, the headline in one paper said, "Wide scale invasion of Gaza planned for after Bush's visit". I took my copy of the newspaper and added, the words, "...just don't let anyone know."

The season of Passover, when we celebrate our freedom from Egyptian bondage is a time to celebrate the vitality and vibrancy of the Jewish people – the only people of Biblical times who are still here today, who still speak the same language of their ancestors, and who are living in their ancient homeland.

The message of hope, of perseverance, of determination is part of its inspiring reality – and next week I will elaborate more on the meaning and significance of Israel's 60th anniversary. For now, suffice it to say, the energy of Israel is enough to truly enlighten the world and to uplift all who are fortunate enough to experience it. And by the way, the food and the cakes, all kosher for Passover were all delicious!

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