

## Dateline: Israel

*Ruchi Koval / Parshat Vayetzei / December 2, 2022*

### Day 1

Time: unclear

Place: somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean

On the plane I am seated next to a Catholic couple from Tampa who are on their way to Israel with a church mission. They had a lot of questions for me, like: why do the men wear boxes and straps when they pray? What do the different kinds of hats signify? What are the differences between Judaism and Catholicism? (Mostly: Jesus.) What is that little prayer book and why does it open backwards? I was in my zone. Later a rabbi, who was sitting behind us and apparently listened to the whole conversation, thanked me and asked me if I am a professional Jewish educator. I felt good about how I represented my faith.

### Day 2

Time: 4:45 pm

Place: Tel Aviv

I meet a woman on the bus from Florida. She is one of 15 children. She told me they grew up in a church that celebrated Shabbat on Saturday, avoided pork and shellfish, and did many other Jewish traditions. She and two other sisters converted to Judaism. Mind: blown.

### Day 3

Time: 9:20 am

Place: Tel Aviv Stock Exchange

Zohar Raviv is the vice president of Birthright. Some of his quotes:

“Israel isn’t a sightseeing trip. It’s an insight–seeing trip.”

“There’s an alarming relationship between very low levels of knowledge and very high levels of opinion.”

“People come to the table armed to the teeth with exclamation marks and very few question marks.”

“There’s a profound gap between the Jewish story and the Jewish narrative. The Jewish people have a great story to tell. It is a story of a people who over the years consistently demonstrate an inverse relationship between numbers and impact. But our narrative, for hundreds of years, has been about the language of persecution and antisemitism.”

“You cannot sustain a healthy Jewish body on a steady diet of tragedies.”

“Israel was established as a homeland for the Jewish people — not a homeland for the Jewish people who live in Israel.”

“Israel strives to be a state of ideals, not an ideal state.”

“Difference of opinion is the fuel that ignited Jewish life. Judaism is not afraid of difference. It’s afraid of indifference.”

Day 4

Time: 4:30 pm

Place: Tzfat

We are on the rooftop of Livnot Ul’hibanot, a program that recruits diaspora Jews to help build the land and in the process become stronger Jews. It is sixty degrees with a mystical fog and a breeze, symbolic of this city’s deep tradition of Kabbalah, the study of esoteric Judaism. We stand together in a circle and massage each other’s shoulders, then hug. We are women supporting one another in our Judaism, in our journey to align body and soul and release negativity. We are a community. We are one.

Day 5

Time: 7:00 pm

Place: Kotel/Western Wall

We start the day at Yad Vashem and end it at the wall.

The Third Reich is gone.

The Babylonians, gone.

The great Roman Empire, a pile of ruins.

But the Jews are still here, making noise as always, changing the world at the forefront of every social movement and quietly influencing the universe.

We are victors, not victims.

We feel pride, not shame.

Am Yisrael Chai.