

*Where We Are and Where We're Going: Reflections on Life in Israel*

By Rabbi Roy Feldman

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About three weeks ago, my wife Rachel and I visited the Synagogue de la Victoire, the Great Synagogue of Paris. It is a magnificent structure built in the 1870s which fills the entire city block. There is more security to get into that building than at any other synagogue I had ever seen, but we made it in to meet with the shul's Rabbi Moshe Sebbag who gave us a tour. As we were about to leave, Rabbi Sebbag insisted on sharing with us the following Hassidic story. One Friday afternoon in a shtetl in Czarist Russia, just before sunset, a police officer stopped the Hassidic Rebbe. "Where are you going?" asked the officer. The Rebbe replied, "I don't know." The officer was unsatisfied with this answer-- "where are you going?" he asked again. "I don't know," repeated the Rebbe. The officer was frustrated. "You understand that if you do not tell me where you are going I will have to arrest you." "I don't know where I'm going," insisted the Rebbe. At that point he was arrested and taken to the local prison, where the chief of police spoke with him. "How could you say you don't know where you are going? It's Friday evening and you're a rabbi, surely you were going to the synagogue!" The Rebbe looked up at the police chief and said, "When I began my walk this afternoon, headed in the direction of the synagogue, in no way could I have possibly predicted that this evening I would end up in prison. And so you see, chief, we only know where we are, but we never really know where we're going."

We smiled a little awkwardly at Rabbi Sebbag, thanked him for the tour, and continued to an art museum.

Our parsha, *Mas'ei*, opens with a summary of the journeys of *B'nei Yisrael* in the wilderness. Over the course of 40 years, there are 42 stops along way, and the Torah follows a formula to tell us about them: *vayis'u* and *vayachanu*, they traveled from here, and they settled there, they traveled from there, and they settled here. We have already encountered some of the places earlier in the Torah, and some of the places are mentioned here for the first time. Why does the Torah offer this list, this summary? Rashi comments that this list serves to show us *chasadav shel HaMakom*, "the kindnesses of the Almighty." For most of their 40 years in the wilderness, Rashi notes, *B'nei Yisrael* were not unduly burdened. In fact, not counting the first and last years, during the middle thirty-eight years, they only moved 20 times, as God did not wish to cause them excessive inconvenience through frequent, short encampments. Therefore, the Torah presents this list as a reflection of God's love for *B'nei Yisrael*. Even though He punished the people as a result of the sin of the spies and made them travel about the wilderness for 40 years, He nevertheless showed them care and concern throughout this period.

But what Rashi doesn't acknowledge is that at every stop, at each station, no one, including Moshe himself, had the slightest idea of how long the stop would last. Are we here for one year, or for one hour? Should we unpack and build a new tent, a new camp? Or is it advisable to just live out of our luggage and be ready for the next move? It's an exhausting state of dependence and of reliance. Even more than the rebbe in the story, *b'nei yisrael* knew where they were, but they had no idea where they were going.

The story about the Rebbe really resonated with us a day later, when it became clear that the next leg of our trip, to Israel, would involve being there during a war. Months ago, when Rachel and I planned this vacation, we could not have planned to be in Paris in a time when synagogues and kosher groceries are attacked, or in Israel when there is a daily threat of rockets. Just a few hours after we landed on Thursday and settled into my aunt's apartment in Holon, just south of Tel Aviv, we were greeted with the warning sirens instructing us to move to a *merchav mugan*, a sheltered zone. In that building, it was the stairwell, which was built with reinforced concrete. We then heard the explosions-- what Israelis call the "boomim," the booms, which are scary at first but by the second or third instance, they become comforting as they are the sounds of the Iron Dome system intercepting an incoming rocket. We are then instructed to remain in the stairwell for a few more minutes in the event of shrapnel falling in the area. In fact, the only damage caused by rockets in central Israel was from shrapnel and hot shards from the falling intercepted rockets. This was only the third day of Operation Protective Edge, and people still didn't really know what to expect. Rachel and I chose to spend Thursday evening in Tel Aviv, but all the places where one would expect to see a large crowd of either native Tel-Avivites or tourists were empty.

Months ago, when we had planned to spend shabbat with my family in Holon, we could not have planned for it to look the way it did. I would like to share with you our experiences that Friday.

We began the day by having brunch at my cousin's bakery in Giv'at Shmuel, the city which houses Bar Ilan University as well as a large modern orthodox community. My aunt was telling me how every Friday, they donate the unsold challahs from the bakery to those in need-- they usually have about 20 or so leftover challahs by closing time, around 4 o'clock. However, on this Friday, by noon, there were no more challahs. And many more customers continued to come in throughout the afternoon, disappointed that there was no more challah. As it turned out, residents of Giv'at Shmuel were hosting their friends and family from the South, Ashdod and Ashqelon, for shabbat. As towns closer to Gaza, they are attacked more frequently, and while in Giv'at Shmuel you have a minute and a half from the start of the siren to go to the sheltered zone, in those southern towns there are only 15 seconds. Residents of Ashdod commonly joke that if they lived in Tel Aviv, when they heard a siren they could first make a cup of a coffee and only then go to the sheltered area. The people of Giv'at Shmuel, and in other parts of the country, were able to give their brothers and sisters in the South a more peaceful shabbat.

Friday night, Rachel and I attended shul. The gabbai announced that there is no sheltered zone in the shul, as it was built before such rooms were standard, but suggested that the kitchen and the stairwell leading up to the women's balcony were the "safest areas." That day, the Chief Rabbi, Rabbi David Lau, had issued a policy for all shuls that don't have sheltered areas that services should be quick, without unnecessary singing and long melodies, and the rabbi should not give a speech. And in case the rabbi of this particular shul forgot or did not hear this ruling, several members of the shul did not hesitate to remind him of that fact throughout services both Friday night and Shabbat morning. "The rabbanut said no sermon today, Rabbi!"

Services were indeed quicker than usual. We left immediately after services ended and just as we arrived at the entrance to the apartment building, the siren sounded. All of the apartment buildings in the city were instructed to leave the front door unlocked, so that passer-by caught in a siren would be able to go into the building for shelter-- something we had to do while in Tel Aviv. In that stairwell in Holon we met all the neighbors who I never met in my dozens of visits to that apartment throughout my life. The siren sounded twice more during dinner, interrupting our first course and our second.

We may not know where we're going, but we know where we are. The outpouring of chesed in Israel to the families affected by the rockets and the soldiers involved in both the Iron Dome system and later the ground invasion in Gaza is unimaginable and unparalleled. When Rachel and I went to the Beilinson Hospital in Petach Tikva in order to visit wounded soldiers, we were greeted in the lobby with soldiers pushing carts of food asking if we would like cake. "No thanks," we said. "No-- please-- take a cake!" they insisted. This group had received so many donations of food that they had already distributed food to all the soldiers in the hospital, and then to other patients in the hospital, and now they were still left with too much food. That same day there was a call for people to donate blood for the wounded soldiers at Beilinson Hospital-- when we arrived at the Blood Donation office, they told us to come back next week as there were no availabilities now to donate. They were fully booked.

We know where we are, we don't know where we're going. What was true on a personal level for the Rebbe in the story, and for Rachel and me on our trip, is true on a national level for b'nei yisrael in our parsha as they settle at each station. It has been true for the Jewish people ever since the destruction of the Temple-- we have been perpetually caught in parshat mas'ei, whether in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North Africa, or any place where Jews settled. And I think it's the way to sum up the feeling in Israel during this war. We don't know where we're going. No one has any idea how or when this will end-- I remember on the fifth day of the operation, every commentator on every major news channel in Israel was saying "we are closer to the end than we are to the beginning." Obviously, they were wrong, but they had no idea. Nevertheless, the feeling in Israel is clear. By the end of our trip, the restaurants in Tel Aviv were full again, if not by tourists, by Israelis. We have to continue living our life, and we have to give tzedakkah *to* and do chesed *with* those who are most significantly impacted by this situation. Even though we don't know where we're going, at the very least, we need to know where we are.