

July 2015

Still Dreaming of Israel

A few weeks before our congregational Israel trip, I started dreaming about the Holy Land. I pictured our old apartment on Shalom Aleichem Street and wondered what it would feel like to visit the area as a congregational leader rather than live there as a student. I had heard that the country had changed significantly since I had been there, and I imagined what things might look like in this decade. I remembered what it felt like to wake up every morning in a foreign country and feel at home, and I hoped I would have that feeling again. Now, three weeks after returning from the trip, I can honestly say that this trip surpassed even my wildest dreams!

Just experiencing the geography of Israel feels unreal. Israel is such a tiny spot on the map that it is possible to travel the entire country from north to south by car in one day! From the north, you can see Lebanon, and from the Golan Heights you can see down into Syria; from the east you can look across the Dead Sea into Jordan; the Sinai is in the south where you can see into Egypt; and if you are standing in the west, then you've probably got your toes in the warm Mediterranean Sea! You can visit the most ancient archaeological sites and also the most modern hotels, malls and high rises in the same day, in the same city, even in the same neighborhood!

When it comes to the culture and the people, Israel is a place most people can only dream of! It's hard to understand from our perspective here in America and especially in southern California but in Israel, people are actually relaxed. They are not as busy or as frantic as we are (except when they are shopping for salads, fresh challah and baked goods, and the other makings of Shabbat dinner at the outdoor market on Friday afternoon). They take three hours to enjoy lunch with friends, family or co-workers, and that doesn't mean they don't work just as hard as we do here. In Israel, parents don't worry for the safety and security of their children because they don't experience crime the way we do. People take care of each other's children, even when they don't know those children. Parents don't feel compelled to follow a child's every move, and so Israeli children grow up confident, self-sufficient, and trusting of others. And if you think I am still dreaming, consider our bus driver's admission that Israelis are often afraid to come to America because of what they see on television and in the news. They think that people kidnap children, kids shoot other kids in schools,

neighborhoods are run by gangs, police officers shoot civilians, and mentally ill people are allowed to carry guns. Israelis much prefer to live in a place where they feel safe and where they are not concerned every day for the safety of their children.

Actually being in Israel again felt like a dream. I kept telling Harvey, "I can't believe we are actually here! In many ways it felt like going home again, only this time I had the privilege of seeing Israel through other people's eyes. There is too much to describe in detail, but here are some highlights of things we enjoyed:

- waking up in the morning and remembering where we were!
- enjoying the amazing Israeli breakfasts in the hotels;
- placing all of your prayers in the cracks in the Kotel (the Western Wall);
- walking through the recently excavated water tunnels under the Old City;
- standing and reciting Kaddish together on Masada, for all those who were lost on Masada and for those we had personally loved and lost;
- floating in the Dead Sea;
- speaking with experts in Israel's history and culture;
- learning about Israel's kibbutz movement from a kibbutz founder;
- exploring the breathtakingly beautiful Tel Dan Nature Preserve;
- shopping in the artist's colony in the ancient city of Tsfat (Safed);
- standing and singing Hatikva in Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, in the same spot where Israel's Declaration of Independence was signed just 67 years ago, seeing the tears in everyone's eyes and feeling the true significance of our journey together.

I heard from so many of our congregants that you were reading our emails, admiring our pictures, and following us on our travels. We were so happy to know that you were virtually experiencing the trip with us. When we returned, it was our pleasure to present our congregation with a set of beautiful new candlesticks and a new Hanukkah menorah. This trip made dreams a reality for many of us, and it marked a new milestone in Temple Etz Rimon's history.

Theodore Herzl is the political activist credited with the vision of Zionism and the pursuit of an Israeli state. Herzl said: "If you will it, it is no dream." Our dream of a journey to Israel became a reality because we didn't just dream about it; we willed it to happen. I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who made it happen. Thank you to ARZA (American Reform Zionist Association) who served as our agents and planned the trip with me. Thank you to Lizz for helping me coordinate many of the essential details of a congregational trip. Thanks also go to Lizz for taking pictures, posting those pictures along with email updates, and

for providing personalized tote bags filled with all the necessities! Thank you to my traveling companions who not only made this dream possible but also made it enjoyable. And thanks to all in our congregation who supported us from home, who shared our excitement, and who will undoubtedly endure our stories and pictures for some time to come!

It really is difficult to describe this experience, especially to someone who has never been to Israel. It is difficult to describe, but there is one Hebrew word in our vocabulary that our tour leader, Ron, used repeatedly: “Sababa!” “Sababa” means “cool” or “awesome” or “all good” or “no worries.” To Ron, everything was “sababa”—from the spectacular Jerusalem summer moon to the way his favorite birds flew in the air. On the day that we planned to drive from Jerusalem back up to the north, Ron accidentally left his bag at the hotel. We were already en route when he discovered it wasn’t on the bus with us. He called the hotel to arrange for a taxi to bring us the bag. What to do with a group of 12 people while waiting an hour for a taxi? Our bus driver, Assi, decided to take us to his own home which was nearby. Imagine all of us filing out of our mini-bus and crashing Assi’s beautiful Jerusalem home! Assi gave us a tour of his house, proudly displayed pictures of his wife, son and daughter, immediately heated up water and served us tea with fresh mint, fruit and nuts, and made us all feel welcome. We had only been with him for 3 days or so, but it was as if we were old friends! Our group was so impressed by his graciousness; I am not sure they believed me when I said that this was not just Assi, that this kind of hospitality likely would have been offered by any Israeli. So this delay that could have been a challenge to a group tour turned out to be a highlight—a treat, a bonus, an experience of hospitality that none of us will forget. This too was so “sababa.”

An online urban dictionary explains that “sababa” is not just a word but a way of life. Spending 10 days in Israel was dreamlike and hard to describe. But I can say without hesitation that it was so “sababa.”

Three weeks after returning home, I find that I am still dreaming of Israel. I can still hear the Hebrew in my head. I can still hear the laughter and lilting conversation of Israeli children. I can still feel the hot air and smell the dust and the Jerusalem stone. I can still taste the savory, fresh vegetables, the warm, sweet pastries, and the rich, strong Israeli espresso. I can still marvel at the sense of safety and security we felt each day, and the warmth and hospitality we experienced from strangers as we traveled throughout the country.

I suppose I shouldn't be so sad that I miss Israel. I suppose that dreaming of Israel and continuing to check the Jerusalem weather on my iPhone keep Israel close to my mind and to my heart. The real moment of sadness will come, if and when the dreams fade and I no longer remember back to the last trip or yearn for the next one. I returned to Los Angeles but I was already longing to return to Israel. I hope that this trip will be just the first of many Temple Etz Rimon trips, and I am thrilled that several congregants have expressed interest in a future trip.

So for now, I hope my fellow travelers will join me in reminiscing about our journey, and I hope others will join me in dreaming of our next trip.

Will you be ready to go in 2017?

That would be so Sababa!