

“The Courage To Move Forward”ⁱ

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Shana tova!

A few years ago, when my kids were young enough that I got to drive all three of them to school in the morning, they posed a question to one another as a game. If you won \$10M dollars in the lottery, what would you do with the money? They were little, and they were cute: I'd buy a racecar, or a pony, or a Rocketship. Eventually, they remembered that I was in the car with them, driving, and they turned their question to me: Dad, what would you do if you won \$10M in the lottery? I didn't have to think about it because I knew the answer in my soul. "I would take every person at Temple Emanu-El, the entire congregation, to visit Israel."

And it's true. If I could, I would, because I so strongly believe that a guided, cultural encounter with Israel is nothing short of profound when it comes to creating Jewish identity. Especially for teenagers, who are pulled in a million different directions. Teens who travel to Israel see doorways for spiritual growth that will serve them for the rest of their lives. They become, most of the time, adults who put time and effort into their Judaism, and who care deeply about the Jewish people.

I am a prime example. Judaism was not strong in our home growing up, and my Jewish identity was tenuous, at best. Despite all of this, or maybe because of it, my parents sent me to Israel as my bar mitzvah present with my best friend's family on their synagogue trip. The trip was too expensive for my whole family to go on, and at that point, my parents had not yet been, but they could afford to send me. And so, I went. Looking back, that trip, and my experiences, set the course for my life: my passions, my calling, my career, and how we are raising our children.

I am not alone in this. The journey towards Israel began in the Torah as our spiritual legacy.

Only 10 generations after Noah's flood, our ancestors, Abraham, and Sarah, are living in the land of Haran, modern day Syria. There, they have a comfortable existence, but they are destined to be part of a much bigger story, one that would change the world.

God called them with the words:

לֶךְ-לְךָ Lech Lecha(Lechi Lach)- take yourself forward...

מֵאַרְצְךָ Ma'ArtZecha -from out of this place (where you are comfortable)...

אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶה "El HaEretz Asher AreKah-to the land that I will show you."ⁱⁱ

God tells Sarah and Abraham that as they travel forward, they will ‘be a blessing’, and partners with God to transform the world from what it is, a place of brokenness, to what the world ought to be, a place of wholeness, health, and justice.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are called to be courageous, and to take inspiration from our ancestral narrative.

Our sages are quick to point out that the Hebrew constructⁱⁱⁱ of ‘Lech Lecha’ is both an imperative and is reflexive at the same time. So, it is a command to take ourselves ‘forward’, but in doing so, we are commanded to take ourselves inward. That physical journey also becomes a spiritual one. The journey is not to a random place, but rather, to a place that Abraham and Sarah had not yet seen... the land which today we know as Israel.

Since Jewish time began, the journey to Israel has been an essential yearning for our Jewish identity. And, I believe, that every one of us is still being ‘called’ to make this pilgrimage today.

For thousands of years, since the destruction of the 2nd Temple, Jews all over the world pined and prayed for the chance to return to The Land. Hundreds of Jewish generations could only dream about what we are able to do today, 75 years after the recreation of the Jewish state, to hop on an airplane and hours later, be in that place where our ancestors walked, and where today more than half of the Jews in the world live.

So, you can imagine the excitement that I felt when congregant Ed Schiffer asked me a version of the question my kids had posed years earlier. Over a cup of coffee at Crème, Ed wanted to brainstorm some ideas about where a significant gift to Temple Emanu-El would be most impactful. My answer was ready: Let’s take them to Israel!

Not the whole congregation, we were not talking about that much money, but we could bring the ones who would benefit most at the right time in their lives: our teens. Thus, the Schiffer Teen Israel Adventure was born. A chance for our 16-year-olds, our Sunday-school Confirmation class, to travel to Israel with their TE friends and their rabbi. A 10-day trip, designed to have them tap into their Judaism, deeply engage with the complexities of Israeli society, and fall in love with both the country and her people.

I am proud to say that Ed Schiffer has set up a fund to ensure that this trip is available, every other year, in perpetuity. Meaning that every single kid at Temple Emanu-El will have a chance to go to Israel. You are all welcome to contribute to this endeavor. As far as I know, we are the only synagogue with this type of subsidized program in the country!

This past June I led the first trip, with 27 teenagers from Temple Emanu-El. In all of my years of being a rabbi, it was the most meaningful experience that I have had.

The trip was a wild success. The kids really bonded with one another. Each day brought us deeper into Jewish history, both ancient and modern. We got to see the immense challenges that Israel faces today. And every one of our 27 teenagers discovered an authentic feeling of 'belonging' to the Jewish people.

It was not a foregone conclusion that this would happen. Your rabbis put a lot of thought and intention into how the kids might engage with the country of Israel, and not just the myth.

We needed the kids to be open to challenge their own assumptions about what Israel was and was not. So when we arrived in Tel Aviv, after a long, overnight flight, with everyone sleep-deprived and jet-lagged, ...we took the kids dancing.

Not to a club, or Israeli folk-dancing, but rather to the famous Gaga ballet studio. Our group had a private space overlooking the Jaffa port, where we were led by a young man with tattoos and a nose ring. He had us shaking and spinning, twisting, and turning around the room; each of us interpreting his instructions differently, inventing our own rhythms. And here is the kicker...all of this was done without any music. Does a room full of teenagers being asked to dance without music in front of each other sound awkward to you? You are right, it totally was. There was a lot of giggling and laughing. Twice the instructor had to stop us to insist that we refocus, but eventually, as a group, we got into it.

At the end of the hour, we sat down in a circle, and I asked the group why they thought we had started our trip in such an unorthodox fashion. Their answers were spot on: That I wanted them to get out of their comfort zone and to learn to trust one another when they were vulnerable. That I wanted them to interact with a secular Israeli who was passionate about alternative Jewish expression; and to see a dance form that reflected Israeli society. The Gaga dance approach has a loose structure, and it depends on everyone innovating. Only when each person interprets the general goal in a way that works for them, and really puts in the effort, does the 'dance' come together. Needless to say, everyone slept very well that first night.

Over the next few days, while exploring ancient mosaics, mystic mountain top villages, and contemporary culture, we met many people who call Israel their home. Each one held strong opinions and was not shy about sharing what they thought.

In the city of Lod, which is the 2nd oldest city in the world, we met Nashua, an Arab-Muslim woman, who guided us through a museum exhibit. She was friendly, so we asked if she would speak with us, informally, after the tour. She agreed. After hearing her story, the teens asked her questions. Some of them were very frank, and she answered just as directly. Nashua expressed her concerns about where Palestinian leadership was taking her people. She also shared what it was like to be a minority in Israel, and her frustrations with the inequities and feeling like a second-class citizen. Parts of what she shared were uncomfortable for us, but we appreciated her honesty.

On another occasion, we enjoyed the home-hospitality of a young man named Rafa. He is part of the Druze people, another minority in Israel, many of whom proudly serve in the army, and cherish Israel as a safe haven. He shared that the Muslim world has been harsh to the Druze, and thus they feel immense loyalty to the state of Israel. He also told our teens a bit about the Druze religion, most of which is a secret, and it centers around reincarnation. Our kids were fascinated.

The next day, after snorkeling over the ruins of Caesaria, we went to Zichron Yaakov, a modern town built by Jewish pioneers. There we met with Ofer Eden, a veteran of the Yom Kippur war who was severely wounded in the fighting, losing his right arm, with partial damage to his left. Ofer shared how hard it was to adjust to his new reality as a young man. He looked our teens in the eye as he conveyed some of his darkest times, how he had found resilience, and worked so hard to return -not just to being alive, but to a life of meaning. We were deeply inspired.

On another morning we went to Israel's border with Syria to meet with Yaakov, who had not been home yet after having spent a week 'in the field' doing maneuvers with his reserve army unit. We were standing on Tel A-Saki, where, 50 years ago, a Jewish platoon took a stand during the Yom Kippur war. The unit needed to hold strong and buy time for the rest of the Israeli army to mobilize against brigades of Syrian tanks. Almost all of the IDF soldiers died in that battle, so that the country could survive the day.

Yaakov then took us into an underground bunker, a maze of twists and turns in the dark, where today's IDF soldiers train to protect citizens against tunnel attacks. Hands on the shoulder in front of them, our teens were led through the maze; and saw a glimpse of the IDF's training and trust.

Perhaps the most tender exchange happened on a Friday, just hours before sundown. We brought Shabbas candles, and cake, to a small group of soldiers from a tank unit on the Lebanon border. Each of them introduced themselves and told us about their family, their brothers and sisters, where they lived, and where their family originated from. Every one of the soldiers was relatable. Keep in mind, that these guys were only a year or two older than our teens, and when they shared their answers (mostly through translation), they came off not as macho, but as shy. Our teens were drawn to them. There was a real connection. It is hard to describe exactly why, but when it was time to leave, there were hugs and tears from everyone. Personally, my heart went out to the parents of these soldiers, who, knowing the risk, send their kids to the army in order to protect the Jewish people.

We arrived in Jerusalem an hour before Shabbat began. We prayed at the Kotel with a sea of Jews who spanned the spectrum of Jewish religiosity, from shtreimels to crew cuts, from covered heads to dreadlocks, and we relished in the delightful symphony of Jewish voices raised up in prayer. Shabbat morning, we attended an egalitarian Orthodox minyan, visited some of Christianity's most sacred sites, saw priceless works of art at the Israel Museum, and sang Havdalah together to bring this incredible day to a close.

That evening, we participated in a peaceful demonstration. We wanted our teens to see democracy at work, and that it was both the right, and the responsibility, of every Jew to stand up for themselves and our vision of self-determination.

Since January there have been weekly protests all over Israel every Saturday night. The majority of the Israeli public^{iv} are protesting against the current, religiously extremist government, that is legislating to curb women's rights, repeal gay rights, and change the definition of who is legitimately Jewish in the eyes of Israeli law. Primary on their agenda is to weaken the Supreme Court, which for decades has protected minorities, and the rights of secular Jews. It is a complicated situation that personally pains me on a deep level.

When the founders of Ben Gurion's generation re-established the State of Israel in 1948, there was a premise that the country would always be Jewish, democratic, and pluralistic.^v That vision is now being challenged, not from outside enemies (who are still a threat), but internally by her citizens. Right now, Israeli society is so divided that it is unclear how this fissure will be resolved. However, I know that Israel has been through a lot, and we Jews have been through even more. So, I have faith in Israel as a democracy, and its invigorated civic engagement to find a path forward.

We took our teens to the demonstration because we wanted them to see that Israel is a complex society. Just like America is a complex society. We wanted them to know that our relationship, love, and support for Israel is not with any particular elected government, but rather, with her people, our people, even when times are hard.

The snippets from this trip that I have shared with you cannot possibly do justice to the existential lessons that we learned, or the joys that we experienced together.

We danced through the streets of Jerusalem, rejoicing in our place in its history.

At Yad V'shem, we mourned our powerless past, and learned the price of not having a country.

And in the outdoor markets, we experienced the vibrancy of a living, Jewish country full of fruits and goods, movement and laughter, aromas and color, romance, and energy.

Perhaps the best way to describe our teens' experience is not through my words, but through theirs. Many of their memories are recorded on our Temple Emanu-El website, but I want to conclude by sharing just one, written by 16-year-old, Laura Pollock. She writes:

"My Israel trip seems impossible to explain to others. I never expected the overall impact this trip would truly have on me forever. There were so many highlights, but I especially enjoyed feeling at home in this country so far away from my other home. I never expected the genuine connection I felt being in the country, and the people could not have been more welcoming. Because of this trip, I'm taking away true gratitude for Judaism, more than I ever have. This trip allowed me to really feel PROUD to be Jewish; and the ability to be so openly Jewish was such a weird but comforting feeling. Learning about the culture and especially the IDF was so much

more meaningful physically being there. I have such a different outlook and respect now after being in Israel, and I cannot WAIT to go back!”

“Lech lecha/lechi lach...take yourself forward,” we are told, “take yourself inward,” on a journey of self-discovery, and deep spiritual connection, to our past and to our future; to our history and to our destiny; towards what it means to be part of a people, and to tap into our collective soul. To travel forward, and in doing so, to ‘be a blessing.’

Our next Schiffer Teen Israel Adventure is June of 2025.

“Our cup runneth over...”^{vi}

Shanah tova!^{vii}

ⁱ As always, I want to acknowledge my partner in writing (and in life!), Marita Anderson for help with this sermon.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 12:1-2; Translation: Artscroll

ⁱⁱⁱ Hitpalel

^{iv} A survey published by the Israel Democracy Institute found that most Israelis, (55.6%), support the court having the ability to strike down laws passed by the Knesset parliament if they contradict principles of democracy. [Link](#)

^v meaning that lots of types of Jews would co-exist together, at least in the eyes of the law

^{vi} Psalm 23

^{vii} With profound gratitude, I'll ask us to rise together as a congregation, for the Great Aleinu, p 202"