The Three People You Meet When You Go To Israel
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July 22, 2005

We say in Jewish tradition that when you travel to the land of Israel, whether for a visit or to make Aliyah, one ascends or goes up to Israel. The Hebrew word Aliyah, used to describe immigration to Israel itself literally means to go up as though entering heaven's gate. Three weeks ago I ascended the gates of heaven when Sharon and I we walked off the plane at Ben Gurion airport. It had been 10 years since either of us had been to Israel, far too long, yet like visiting an old friend who you haven't seen in years, we picked up right where we left off and though we had changed and Israel had changed, we were in each other's presence once again. The familiarity quickly returned and with it a driving curiosity to know what had been happening in each other's lives in the intervening. Imagining seeing your old friend who you had not seen for 10 years and having only a limited amount of time to catch each other up on your lives since you last saw each other, that was how we felt with Israel when we landed, we wanted to get reconnected and immerse ourselves in the life of this country.

No matter what your level of Jewish knowledge, one is always a student when they go to Israel. A student of the land and how it has changed from one visit to the next. I marveled at the skyline of Tel Aviv, with its gigantic modern sky scrapers, bright lights and picturesque views. Ten years ago few of those buildings stood so tall, now they stand not only tall but in this post 9/11 world I dare say they stand proudly as well, as much of a testament to the permanence of the Jewish homeland as the ancient walls of Jerusalem. Here where ancient the golden Jerusalem stone speaks of Israel's historic past, the skyline of Tel Aviv proudly declares its hopeful future.

Every visitor to Israel is also a student of the Hebrew language. Even if the only word you know how to use correctly is Shalom, you use it often and with great pride. Like the guy in the Verizon commercial, who intone 'can you hear me now' every few feet, "shalom' begins and ends every encounter. It's a surreal experience to hear the language of prayer and torah used to order a kosher BigMac at McDonalds, or on the television in Israeli commercials that are as sophisticated and sensually bombastic as any in the United

States. Imagine that shampoo commercial where the woman has a mind altering experience as she massages the soap into her hair, now imagine it in Hebrew!

This is my old friend Israel, who I have not seen for 10 years, this is Israel I yearn to understand and connect with once again. But how does one get o know a country as one would know a life long friend?

The poet Yehudah Amichai, who Rabbi Goor often reads selections from every High Holidays wrote many years ago of the experience of being a tourist in Israel. In his poem Tourists, Amichai writes:

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall
And they laugh behind heavy curtains
In their hotels.
They have their pictures taken
Together with our famous dead
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb
And on Ammunition Hill.
They weep over our sweet boys
And lust after our tough girls
And hang up their underwear
To dry quickly
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

It's a powerfully conflicted poem, and it is the answer to the question how do you get reacquainted with a country as though it were a long lost friend. One visits Israel and is challenged to see the trees in the midst of the forest. The context of being in the holy land, a land whose past and present are literally inseparable from each other. They can't build a subway in Jerusalem because ever foot they dig unearths new archeology, construction companies of the present prefer to do as has been done for generations, to build on top of existing land rather than excavate a foundation, for fear of what they might find beneath the surface that will indefinitely delay their project.

And so as Sharon and I traveled the streets of Israel for the first time in 10 years I kept Amichai's admonition to see the people beneath the ancient arches in forefront of my mind. I wasn't looking for history or ancient stones on this visit, this time I sought out a different foundation of the state of Israel I was looking for people who like its ancient cities could tell its modern day story.

Last summer I read Mitch Albom's book, "The 5 people you meet in heaven when you die". The premise of the book is that when the lead character Eddie, a maintenance man at a boardwalk carnival, tragically dies trying to save a young girl his soul goes up to heaven and encounters five pivotal figures from his life. Each person has been waiting for him in heaven, and, as Albom reveals, each life (and death) was woven into Eddie's own in ways he never suspected. Each soul has a story to tell, a secret to reveal, and a lesson to share. Through them Eddie understands the meaning of his own life even as his arrival brings closure to theirs.

Eddie had a life time and met 5 people that forever changed him, I had 2 ½ weeks in Israel and met three that for the moment at least express the essence of this country and its tremendous challenges.

The first person I met was Yosi, who ran the falafel stand across from our apartment in the Rechavia neighborhood of Jerusalem. Rechavia is where I lived 10 years ago, and is right in the center of Jerusalem. Ten years ago, it was a liberal mostly secular Israeli neighborhood, many of its shops were open on Shabbat, its residents were mostly Israeli born and if you met a man on the street there was a 50-50 chance he would be wearing a yarmulke. Today it is a largely Anglo neighborhood, typified by students renting

apartments for a year of study and Anglo expatriates who have made Aliyah. The neighborhood has shift dramatically to the right politically and religiously. It seemed to me that every one wore a yarmulke, on Shabbat the place is a mass of people walking to and from synagogue.

It is on one of the main streets that I met Yosi our falafel guy. Yosi has worked on this street for 30 years, and has seen it change literally before his eyes. Used to be that he opened Saturday afternoons for the late lunchtime crowds looks for a quick shabbas bite on there way home from the park, now he says he wouldn't dare for fear of retaliation form the neighbors. Yosi has served in every war Israeli has ever fought and he doesn't want his children to serve in the army. He has sent them actually out of the country to work in Asia and Europe so that they can have the life he feels he never had. Yosi loves American Jews and American Judaism; he spent some time working here in the United States at a kosher catering company and was amazed at the warmth and love he was shown by the local conservative rabbi and the congregations. He wishes he had rabbis in Israel like he met in the US, ones that take an interest in people not just in Jewish law and as he says making it hard to be Jewish. What I learned from Yosi, is the frustration and dejection of the modern Israeli. He has fought his wars and doesn't want to fight any more, he has seen and experience what a vibrant, open and progressive Jewish community can be, he benefited form it himself here in the US. He knows that that is what Israel needs religiously and politically right now, but he is on the sidelines, and his children are in another country. Yosi wants things to change, but for the moment at least he feels it better to go along so he can get along. What will it take to get Yosi to fight one more war, this time for the soul of modern Israel? Will his children take up the cause with him, or will he as he says he might, leave Israel and move here, to the Valley where all his friends are already?

Next I met David. David is a long time friend of my wife Sharon. He works at Yad Vashem and made Aliyah to Israel from Sweden with his Israeli wife 4 years ago. David lives in what he calls 'greater Jerusalem' and what ever one else calls a settlement. He is smart, worldly, articulate, religious on the right of the Israeli political spectrum. Maybe not the far right, but definitely part of the vocal minority that is struggling with Sharon's efforts of disengagement and a restart of trying to make peace with the Palestinians.

David is the heartbeat and driving force behind modern Israel. His views shape domestic policy and relations with the Palestinians who claim his home as their land. I learned a lot form David as he gave us a private tour of the new museum at *Yad Vashem*. I learned of his incredible sense of history and pride in Judaism and the Jewish people, how the experience of the holocaust continues to shape his sense of Israeli destiny and purpose as a home land for Jews and place its unique and unquestionable in the world. And I also learned from David that while we had so much in common, we had profound differences that are not reconcilable in his world view. There is no place for a Palestinian state in his 'Greater Israel' and I am not too sure that there is a place for a Jew, like me, who doesn't agree with him either. Though we tip toed around the political questions and found much common ground there is a language of politics that we cannot discuss, and it typifies a divide in Israel much like that in our own nation been the adamantly right and the adamantly left. What will it take for everyone to find a center that they can live with?

Lastly I met Leah. We joined Leah and three generations of her family at their home in the north for Shabbat dinner. Lean gathers her children and grandchildren around her every Friday for dinner, she cooks all the traditional dished, chicken soup, *kreplach*, brisket, *kugel*, and a few healthy things to appears her vegetarian daughter. This night was different; this night for the first time in the history of their family a rabbi was joining them for Shabbat dinner. They were as fascinated with me a reform rabbi as I was with them a typical Israeli family. They asked me to do the *kiddish* and the *motzi*. In part as an honor, but as I soon found out because none of them knew they blessing or the melodies. Mine was the only yarmulke in the room, though they looked to find them in a drawer they found only one other. The *kiddish* cup was from Passover and had not been used since then. The *challah* was without a cover and cut to resemble slices of bread. It was a *shabbas* dinner like any in my family, only they didn't know how to make *shabbas*. To them religious Judaism was only for people in black hats and long coats, it was all or nothing, the Judaism they didn't practice was orthodoxy, they had no idea there was any other variety. What I learned from Leah and her family was that they need progressive, liberal Judaism in the same way that Americans needed it 100 years ago, and Germans needed it 200 year ago. They need it because they are living Jewish without living,

enjoying and benefiting from a Jewish life. They need it because they need an authentic and accessible way to say thank you to God for the blessings in their life.

Three people, in a little less than three weeks, its not a complete survey of the population of modern Israel but it is a snap shot, a start. What I learned most from all of them is that they need to learned a little something from each other and maybe a bit from us, American progressive Jews, as well. Imagine if we could all sit together around a Shabbat table, imagine if we could all share and learned and open our hearts to and with each other. Imagine for a moment a Jewish state where we can't, and then you will feel as I do the urgency of the matter. In the coming year we as a congregation will travel to Israel, you'll be hearing soon of a number of trips that we have planned for the New Year and the coming summers. I urge you to take your children, your family and join us on these missions, discover the heart and soul and essence of Israel through the people that live it each day, and share with them the heart and soul of your love of Judaism. Amichai talks about how tourists could learn so much if they stopped to speak with the man beneath the roman arch, the man beneath the arch could gain form getting to know us and the Judaism we live and love as well.