

After a Trip to Israel

Friday night, December 29, 2006, Rabbi Steve Cohen

Marian, Ari and I flew to Israel a week and a half ago, to visit our 18-year-old daughter Rachel, who is spending a year in Jerusalem. We got back to SB this morning and so while the memories are still fresh, I would like to share with you some of what we saw and heard and felt and thought during our nine days in the holy land.

I have always accepted the old idea of the early Zionists that the Jewish return to the land of Israel has brought us to a healthier, more complete, more natural Jewish existence than we have had in the diaspora.

In Israel, our people returned to the earth, and became farmers again, after centuries of being disconnected from the soil. Every time I return to Israel, I see proud Jewish workers, Jewish farmers, Jewish soldiers, Jewish gardeners, Jewish taxi drivers, Jewish shop keepers...and I hear a voice saying “this is the way a people lives in its homeland.” With street signs in Hebrew, and the shop names in Hebrew, and the old men muttering on the bus in Hebrew and the women yelling in the market in Hebrew.

In Israel, most importantly, Judaism is normal—not some peculiar minority phenomenon—normal, and alive, not a fading memory of a culture and a way of life that are fast disappearing. This is what I go back for, year after year. And so this time, like every time, I found myself asking on every day of the trip: what seems healthy here? And what seems broken?

I found myself thinking about the army, more than I ever have before. It’s not surprising, actually, since I was visiting my 18 year old daughter, whose Israeli friends of her own age are now entering the army. A guy friend is training for the paratroopers, and some of her girl friends were sent to man a checkpoint in the West Bank the day after they finished basic training. My college room-mate Danny lives in Jerusalem, and his son Hovav—who is exactly the age Danny and I were when we were freshmen together at Harvard—is getting ready to go in. Danny told me that Hovav has a good physical profile, so he will be a fighter. And Yoav and Avi Gross Schaefer, who not that long ago were racing around the halls of this synagogue, had their formal induction at the Western Wall yesterday.

All these young people—I really can’t help calling them kids—are going into the army at a time of intense criticism of the army’s handling of this summer’s war in Lebanon. There have been many stories of units receiving conflicting orders, from different superiors, sometimes several

times in a single day. Some people are saying that this kind of confusion always occurs in wartime and that it's just that this time the debate is more open and vocal. But my friend Zev, whose daughter Rotem since the last time I saw her has been transformed from an awkward adolescent to a vibrant, warm and thoughtful young woman, told me of young men he knows who came back from Lebanon and who will not talk about what happened and what they experienced.

For me, it was very different this time, riding the trains with soldiers the age of my own kids. I said to Ari, "I'm glad you don't have to go into the army." It's one thing to ride the trains in a sharp looking uniform, and to carry a rifle, and another thing entirely to go to Lebanon and to kill or be killed.

My room-mate Danny told me that Hovav's attitude has changed in the past year. He used to dread going into the army; now he and his friends have embraced it. This country needs to be defended, and they don't want it to be done by someone else. They embrace it as their responsibility.

What is healthy and what is broken? I would not want Ari to have to kill or to be killed, but the fact that in Israel every 18 year old serves, and military service is shouldered equally by every family does seem fundamentally more just and more healthy than our current American system, which exempts the children of the privileged, which generally includes the children of our national decision-makers.

Judaism in Israel has always felt more grounded to me than our Judaism here, much more integrated into the regular rhythms of life. We arrived on the fifth night of Hanukkah, and so as we drove through the streets of Jerusalem, on the way to our hotel, we saw dozens of Hanukkah menorahs burning, not only in the windows, but in many cases dozens right on the sidewalk, in front of an apartment building. We human beings are social animals, and there is something deeply comforting and embracing about bring in a place where the people around us, the entire society, is marking time together with us, with our symbols, and our stories. Last Thursday was Rosh Hodesh Tevet, the first day of the Hebrew month Tevet, which I'm ashamed to say that I...the rabbi around here...often lose track of. Last Thursday, I was reminded that it was Rosh Hodesh by our cab driver, who greeted me with "Hodesh Tov!"/"Good month!" as we climbed into his cab.

I had to make my pilgrimage on Friday afternoon to Mahaneh Yehuda, the huge open air market where Jews of every color, every age, every ethnicity, every degree of religious observance crowd together before Shabbat to buy their fresh bread, their still alive and flopping fresh fish, and

their hot dripping chocolate rugguleah, the vendors shouting *yarad! Yarad! Ham'chir yarad!! It went down! It went down! The price went down!! Ani mocher b'zol hayom! I'm selling for cheap today!*

In Jerusalem this afternoon, just like every week, not just is the Jewish people alive, but Judaism is alive...not remotely artificial or boring or watered down. As my sister-in-law remarked as we walked through the smells and the colors and the cries, the scene in that market is timeless. The people may be dressed a bit different, but that is surely what Jews preparing for Shabbat have always looked like.

On the other hand, the fundamentalist presence was as oppressive as ever...perhaps even more so. Before even arriving in Israel, I was seated on the plane next to a young haredi man whose entire body sent off the urgent signal that he could not and would not make any contact with me...another Jew, wearing a kipah! Now I understand that the Santa Barbara doctrine of every stranger is my best friend is not "normal" either, but the haredim have forgotten Rabbi Shammai's teaching in Pirke Avot: *hevei mkabel kol adam b'sever panim yafot*. Greet every human being with a pleasant countenance.

We did see a different side of the haredi population on the day we went to the Jerusalem zoo, a nice zoo, on the same scale as our SB zoo. It was one of the last days of Hanukkah, which means it was one of the few days that orthodox kids are not in school, and so the families can take an outing to the zoo. The zoo that day was mobbed with hundreds of ultra-orthodox families, and we spent as much time watching and discussing the Jews as we did looking at the animals. My favorite moment came when the announcement came over the loudspeaker that there would be *minchah*/afternoon prayer services on the grass opposite the hippopotamus pool!

We had, as usual, very little contact with any Arabs, which made me think about the title of Jimmy Carter's book *Palestine: Peace or Apartheid*. I haven't read the book yet, and so want to wait before giving you my reaction to it. But the Jews and Arabs of Israel do live separately. Our only real contact with them was walking through the souk in the Old City of Jerusalem, an intense and fascinating experience on many levels. Many shops sell dozens of t-shirts with political messages ranging from pro-Israel to violently anti-Israel. The Palestinian shopkeepers greet you warmly and if you greet them back, they insist that you stop to look, and if you stop to look, you cannot leave without buying. And so each encounter feels like another episode in the hundred year experience of miscommunication, overture and betrayal between Arab and Jew.

We took a taxi out to Hadassah hospital to see the Chagall windows, which I had never seen, and which I found deeply moving, much more so

than I had expected. Chagall worked on them for three years, already an old man, in his seventies, and then repaired them when they were damaged in the Six-Day War. They were his gift to the Jewish people; he didn't receive a penny for them. Each window depicts one of the 12 sons of Jacob, from whom the 12 Tribes of Israel descended. And they span a vast range of emotions, from the unstable watery blue of Reuben to the murderous darkness of Shimon, to the golden wheat yellow of Joseph to the royal purples and reds of Judah. Chagall is probably the greatest of our people's artists, and in that one room he captured us...in all our complexity, difficulty, and grandeur.

From the hospital, we drove into the village of Ein Kerem, a beautiful picturesque town with wonderful old stone buildings on the mountainsides, among olive trees and vineyards. I commented on the beauty to the taxi driver, who agreed and said "you know, it was an Arab village before the establishment of the state. *Hem barchu*. They all ran away." I didn't argue. That is our narrative. We now know, however, that the Arabs who lived there, and their children and grandchildren, have a very different narrative.

Two days ago, on Wednesday morning, I awoke early to the crashing sounds of thunder. I went out into our hotel hallway and sat by the large windows looking out into the street. The hotel was a beautiful building, with high ceilings and arched windows, also once an Arab house of some kind. The rain was pouring down and the wind was blowing up to fifty or sixty miles an hour. The thunder and lightening were getting closer and closer, and I thought of Psalm 29 which we had been singing in synagogue on Shabbat. The Psalm was supposedly written by King David, in Jerusalem, 3,000 years ago, and describes God's power manifested in a thunderstorm.

The voice of God thunders.

The voice of God in power!

The voice of God breaks the cedars!

God shatters the cedars of Lebanon!

He makes them leap like a calf!

The voice of God cleaves with shafts of fire!

The voice of God convulses the wilderness!

The voice of God terrifies the gazelles and strips the forests bare,

While in his Temple all proclaim: Kavod! Glory!!

In this thunderstorm, I thought to myself, everyone in Jerusalem is in the same boat. Every single human being is just trying to stay warm and dry. Jew, Arab, Hasid, secular, Christian, Muslim. Everyone is just hoping the lightning doesn't strike him or his house.

Maybe Jerusalem could use a hurricane, it occurred to me, to teach us how similar we all are, and how we are all in the same boat.

That night, it snowed in Jerusalem, a rare occurrence. The streets became slushy and icy, and we couldn't get a cab to take us back to our hotel, because they were frightened by the conditions. Finally, after a long evening we got back, and watched the snow fall thick and silent on Yerushalayim, the city of peace.

Ten measures of suffering fell upon the world, taught the ancient sages, and nine of those fell upon Jerusalem. Ten measures of beauty fell upon the world, taught the sages, and nine of those fell upon Jerusalem. I wouldn't want my daughter to be spending her nineteenth year in any other city in the world.