

I've just returned from a visit to Israel, where I participated in the GA – the annual gathering of the leaders of North American Jewish Federations and communities. There is so much I would like to share of my trip: some I shared in synagogue last Shabbat, and here are a few highlights:

Young Adults galore! There were so many young people at the conference – It was refreshing to watch their enthusiasm and energy, and commitment to Jewish Peoplehood and to Israel. Some were delegates, others were visitors to the GA spending a gap year – between high school and college, or between college and whatever comes next, on a program in Israel. I knew many of them from Ramah connections, and some were children of my friends and colleagues. It was particularly rewarding to be with my own son, Tal, just finishing up his trimester at Alexander Muss High School, and watch him reconnect with many of his old friends there.

Statesmen and Politicians – Olmert, Barak, Tzipi Livni, Bibi, Nir Barkat, the newly elected mayor of Jerusalem, and more- we heard them all. And it was quite an exciting time to be in the political arena – everyone had something to say about the economic crises, and about Obama, and about the threat of Iran, and the recent hotly contested Jerusalem mayoralty election, and the upcoming national elections in Israel. Bibi gave a campaign speech, covering a lot of current issues facing Israel; Tzipi spoke movingly about how Israel needed to regain and retain its Jewish character, and about Tikkun Olam. The best was Shimon Peres, Israel's President and elder statesman, the last of his generation of lions, inspiring us with a vision of what Israel could be at its best, and the best of the best, was that he was introduced by Kathy Manning the chair of the Executive of the UJC, who lives down the block from me! There were nine of us from Greensboro in the convention hall that morning, but our kvelling and our pride in Kathy filled the place!

Green Israel! Who knew? One day of the conference was devoted to different tracks – I chose a day seminar of environmental sustainability - . We met some of the 150 different non-government organizations devoted to Israel's environment. Cleaning rivers, recycling, passing environmental legislation, providing green space in cities, bike lanes, and more. We began our day with a tour of Hiriya, the huge garbage dump near Ben Gurion Airport, which is being turned into a huge green national park named for Ariel Sharon. They are finding ways to drain its toxicity, use the gases released by the garbage to run nearby factories, and establish a recycling and environmental education center there. We saw several groups of schoolchildren already learning at the Center. The park is slated to officially open in 2010, and to be completed in ten years. It was all quite inspiring. We rented bikes and rode on the trail along the Yarkon river, Israel's most polluted urban waterway, and learned about efforts to restore it. We paused at a memorial to the Maccabiah bridge disaster, and then went on the sea, visiting a coal-fired power plant, and biking on a section of boardwalk that will one day extend from BatYam, south of Tel Aviv, all the way to Herzeliya . One hundred and fifty different organizations, getting out the vote, working with college students and citizens, lobbying politicians, working to make Israel greener and healthier. This is a wonderful, fairly recent development in citizen awareness among the Israeli population, one which I found exciting and admirable.

And then, there was everything else our group managed to do in the short week we were in Israel –

- a lot of delicious eating, in restaurants and on the street falafel stands and chumus eateries, and of course the incomparable Israeli hotel breakfasts,
- an exquisite, breathtaking five hour hike in the desert mountains above Ein Gedi,
- touring a very special K-10 school in Jerusalem,, called Yad b'Yad – hand in hand, where Jewish and Arab kids learn together , and share languages and cultures and friendships,
- walking through Jerusalem, from the Kotel , along the old city walls, through the new city hall, to the Mahaneh Yehuda outdoor market, back to our hotel , over to shul, back again, into town, back to the old city, and more and more.
- Moshe Silberschein met a few of us at 2:30 AM (yes, in the morning!) and took us to a Syrian synagogue where we participated in Bakashot – a middle of the night Hebrew poetry chanting – with beautiful eastern melodies and choirs and soloists.
- And did I mention shopping?

Of course, returning to Israel, and Yerushalayim for me is always a return home – the almost continual running into or meeting old friends and acquaintances from years and lives past. I truly had a wonderful time on this trip to Israel, and I look forward to another Beth David pilgrimage to Israel, so that I can again share with more of us just how special and central and full a place Israel is.

I'm grateful to the Greensboro Jewish Federation for sponsoring this mission, and I'm grateful to our congregation for allowing me the space to grow - as a rabbi, as a Jew, and as a person.

And I should have left my laundry in a wash and fold place in Jerusalem – I'm heading back in early December, this time on a trip on Christian and Jewish clergy from Greensboro. I'm looking forward to connecting with many of our Greensboro ministers – some of whom I'm friendly with, some of whom I don't know yet, to show them "my" Israel,, to see Israel through their eyes, for some the first time, and to build relationships and social capital, which I know will strengthen our community upon our return. I look forward to sharing highlights of that trip when I return – in shul on Dec 13th, and in next month's bulletin column!

Off to pack!

Shalom,
Rabbi Eliezer Havivi