

Israel – Vision and Reality

I just returned from a wonderful trip to Israel this year. (You can read my reflections on my previous trips on our website www.bethdavidsynagogue.org). This time, I was in Israel for the annual Rabbinical Assembly Convention – the meeting of many of the 1600 world-wide Conservative Movement Rabbis.

I learned about the state of the Masorti/Conservative movement in Israel - over 50 synagogues, performing weddings for dozens of couples, helping Israelis find meaning in their Jewishness; and about the growth and dynamism of Conservative communities in Europe and Latin America. I had a chance to share ideas and learn from other rabbis in communities across the United States.

I had the opportunity to study Torah with some wonderful teachers. I was able to see many of my old friends – some who are rabbis who came for the convention and others who are “regular folks” who live in Jerusalem. And I was there for the recent national elections in Israel.

I went to **shul on Shabbat** at Shira Hadasha – a wonderful community that meets in a community center, because they don’t have, and probably don’t want, a building of their own. They have no chazzan and no rabbi – it is made up of young Jews mostly in their 30’s and 40’s, with lots of young children running about, and – it’s a place where everyone sings with gusto, and the sounds of harmony reverberate off the walls, , and at the end of the service, they make announcements in English, so that if there are any visitors who want to be invited to a Shabbat meal, there is a rotation of families who welcome guests to the shul into their homes.

I rented a car on a Sunday, and **drove up to the North** – the fields in the Jezre’el valley were bright green- (it’s the rainy season now!) and wildflowers of red and yellow and purple and blue were on the roadside and on the mountains everywhere. I visited friends at the Sachne nature preserve, and walked along the waterfalls there, and in Tivon, the picturesque village where we raised Daniel and Nadav, and Alon HaGalil, a bedroom community with friends with whom we were close when we lived in Israel 20 years ago; some of them have kids the same ages as ours – some of their adult children are starting their own families, some are off hiking in India and Brazil, some finished with the army, some just going in, and some who were in Gaza during the recent war there, and thank God, are out safely.

I visited **Kibbutz Hanaton**, the Masorti Kibbutz that Judy and I helped found in 1984, which was planned to be a bridge over between the secular- religious divide in Israel – model community where members loved Torah and the Beatles – it has grown in houses and in fields – Where we once raised sheep for milk for gourmet cheese, there is now a huge cow shed which is profitable for the kibbutz. I learned that there’s a group of young recent graduates of Machon Schechter, the Masorti Rabbinical School, who are heading up an effort to revitalize Hanaton as a Masorti community, and have already sold 20 (!) houses on Hanaton to various families to come live there, and reenergize the religious community there. And there’s a waiting list of families who want to buy, but there aren’t enough houses!

Part of the convention were **field trips** to explore different issues surrounding Israel today – the communities in the South, damaged by Hamas rockets recently; new communities that JNF is building for young families near Beersheba; environmental issues in Israel – recycling, pollution cleanup and legislation, greening in cities; the trip that I took was about the **security barrier** separating Israel proper from much of the West Bank. The separation barrier was begun a few years ago by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, at the request/no, demand of communities in Israel to help protect Israel from suicide bombers. In the areas that it has been built, the rate of suicide bombers has been cut drastically. In most places,

it's a fence – in some, it's a big wall. It's very ugly. It interferes with travel and work for many Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and the West Bank villages. On one section of the wall in Abu Dis, an Arab suburb of Jerusalem, I saw graffiti on the wall – “From the Warsaw Ghetto to the Abu-Dis Ghetto.” It was painful. I think that many Israelis are grateful for the protection the wall affords them, and at the same time, regretful, that it has to impose hardship on others.

Most Israelis would like to **leave the West Bank**, or at least parts of it, and help the Palestinians create their own state to live in peace with Israel. However, after the bitter experience of leaving Lebanon several years ago, and then facing Hezbollah war there, and then vacating Gaza, and subsequently facing continued Hamas rockets from there, Israelis are understandably gun-shy that the same could/would happen if they took the Israeli army out of west bank areas – there would be rockets and missiles aimed from just a few miles away, at Tel Aviv.

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The Palestinian Authority government in the West Bank is barely controlling its own population; Hamas, the radical group committed to Israel's destruction is gaining popularity, and there doesn't seem to be a trustworthy negotiating partner just now.

Which brings us to the **elections in Israel**. I was in Jerusalem for the national elections – no, I did not get to vote, because I am registered up north, and I didn't schlep up there on the right day, but I did collect lots of campaign posters, and watch the election returns and post-balloting interviews on television, late into the night.

Binyamin Netanyahu claimed that he would be strong in political leadership, as he was in economic leadership as the country's finance minister a few years ago. Kadima's Tzipi Livni's slogans were *Mah Shetov LaMedina* – What's good for the country, and *Rosh Memshala Acheret* – a different (female) Prime Minister.

The national religious party signs were in blue (Israeli flag) and orange (reminding everyone of the opposition to Gaza disengagement, as if to say – we won't make this mistake again!); A newish Russian – led party (Avigdor Lieberman/ *Yisrael Beiteinu*) was pushing for loyalty oaths to be required of all citizens, and touting a population area swap - Israeli Arab towns to the Palestinian Authority, West Bank Jewish towns to Israel. (Of course, no one bothered to say that the Israeli Arabs have absolutely no interest in living under the corrupt Palestinian Authority, even in their own state, and abandoning Israel's benefits of democracy, etc).

As the elections turned out, Kadima got 28 seats in the 120 seat Knesset; Likud got 27, Yisrael Beiteinu 13, Labor 10 – hardly a ringing endorsement for any one party or ideology. The religious parties, the Arab parties, held on to their constituents votes, and the choice for Israel now is a broad national unity government, or a narrower right-leaning government, and this morning's paper announces that Netanyahu has been given the nod to create one of those two governments. The horse-trading will continue for a few weeks, and in about a month, we'll know who the majority coalition will be.

We heard a lot of **political commentary** around the election process – most of our speakers agreed that there were far more important elections going on in the world this year: The election of Barack Obama, and upcoming elections in Lebanon (Will Hezbollah gain seats, and radicalize Israel's northern neighbor?) Turkey (The Islamic party has been gaining popularity. Turkey has been an important Moslem ally, politically and militarily for Israel. Turkey wants to join NATO, but further Islamicization could be a deterrent to its membership), and Iran (Ahmedinajad and his Shah denial, and his calls to wipe Israel off

the map). And at any rate, because for the fragmentary nature of the current Palestinian leadership, it's unlikely that any peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians will be worked out in the near future – amore critical matter on Israel's agenda, no matter who the prime minister, is the existential threat of Iran and Nuclear weapons, and what can/should Israel do about that.

Israel is so important to us – as American Jews, and as Jewish People working out its destiny on the world stage. Despite its challenges, Israel is vibrant, creative, messy, alive, wrestling with issues of what it means (finally!) to have sovereign power as a Jewish country. For the first time in two thousand years, our people are building a land and a homeland, a great social and spiritual experiment. Tel Aviv, the first all-Jewish city, celebrates its one hundredth birthday this year – one hundred years since 55 families left their homes in Jaffa to build a new community among the sand dunes near the Mediterranean. Today, there are skyscrapers and fountains, theater and high tech industry, hospitals and universities. What a great achievement for our Jewish People!

We American Jews ought to celebrate this Israel. We need to know Israel and Israelis; we need to visit Israel – at least once, and then again. We need to send our children – to study, to be inspired, to see what it means to be a free people in our own land. We need to read and to learn about Israel and give Israel our political and financial support.

In a recent article, my colleague Danny Gordis suggested that every American congregation own an apartment somewhere in Israel, so that when members of the shul visit Israel, we can really live there, and not just stay in a hotel like foreign tourists. While this may not be the year to invest in Israeli real estate, the idea is a good one – being in Israel is both a vision, and a reality. I was fortunate to see both during my recent trip – May we always embrace the vision of Israel, as well as its sometimes-messy reality.

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