

Acharei Mot 5772

To the Max: Reflections on Jewish Life in Israel This Pesach
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The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. My rule alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws; I the Lord am your God’ (Leviticus 18:1-4). I think that may be the most difficult of all of the mitzvot of the Torah: a command to be different, to go against the grain, moment after moment, day in and day out. For a minority people like us, it is a huge challenge to live a fully Jewish life. The pull and the pressure to be like everyone else is too great.

This challenge has faced Jewish people since time immemorial. The rabbinic sages were keenly aware of how difficult it is to swim against the stream and maintain a positive self-identity as a minority, no matter how cherished that identity might be. So were the founders of Jewish camps aware of the challenge. One of the founding principles of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin was that Jewish youth must experience all-encompassing, normative, communal Jewish life, including spoken Hebrew, in order to internalize a strong Jewish identity and maximize its transformative potential.

Nowhere was that idea stronger than in the minds of some of the early Zionist visionaries. They hoped that the modern State would be a place where a Jew could relax fully into Jewish life without external pressures mitigating against its full flourishing, although what they had in mind in terms of religious practice never was uniform.

I suspect a bit of research in early Zionist writings might locate some articulations of a vision in which Jewish life in Israel would resemble the pluralistic approach of the founders of our religion in the first millenia. At that time, Jews in Israel saw themselves as one community, comprised of different approaches and practices. Despite their differences, followers of different schools would marry one another and attend each other’s life cycle events with a sense of shared purpose and destiny. At least, that was how they wanted us to remember them.

Scott and I spent Pesach in Israel with our kids, and many of you have asked me when I would share some reflections on our time there. Today is the day.

It was the first time our immediate family was together since Rosh HasShanah 2019—that's 3 ½ years. That, plus the fact that we get along well and treasure time together, made it magical. The Israel factor made it extra wonderful.

I will begin with a few remarks about the land itself. Then, in accord with my opening, I'd like to share a few reflections about normalized Jewish identity in Israel and then speak a bit more specifically about the religious experience.

The land of Israel is resplendent at this time of year, bursting with fruits, vegetables, grain, and wild flowers. One can easily understand why Pesach also is called "*chag ha'aviv*," "the holiday of Springtime," or more accurately, "the holiday of the budding of the wheat crop," which is what "Aviv" originally meant. We ate mostly farm-to-table, even harvesting some of our food ourselves directly from the earth.

My first experience in Israel, when I was 15, took place on a religious farming moshav where I worked the land, and since that time my connection to Israel bears a strong influence of my own, glorious investment of toil and sweat in the context of a totally religious life in which I had to use every morsel of Hebrew I knew and pick up more. It was also the summer I first fell in love, with a moshavnik who spoke little English, and I'm sure my present excitement over kohlrabi and grapefruit in Israel has much to do with the totality of that first immersive experience. I love to be in Israel for Pesach, where it truly is "*z'man simchateinu*," a time of great joy.

We stayed in Pardes Chana, a settlement in north-central Israel. Although we bought most of our food fresh from farms, we also went to the supermarket, where kosher for Pesach items were everywhere, and not exorbitantly priced. Secular and religious store clerks and customers alike wished one another a "*chag sameach*." We went to the beach in Caesaria, where we sat on the sand among religious and secular Israelis, and easily bought Kosher for Pesach treats at the ice cream stand. Many restaurants and coffee shops around Israel offered kosher for Pesach meals.

Benjy and I enjoyed morning davening outside where our Amidah recitation included the prayer for *tal* (dew), which we only recite in Israel. As I said the

words I looked at the dew literally glistening on the jasmine tree in front of me and the wild flowers below.

I felt proud hearing our kids speak Hebrew fluently. They are all at home in Israel, the oldest, Rena, quite literally. We were amazed by how she has become a real Israeli in many ways—although it is not easy. For me, it was good to practice my Hebrew fluency, to reach a point where I was thinking in Hebrew, maybe even dreaming.

One evening, we met our new son-in-law, Evyatar's huge, Yemenite family for a barbecue on the Moshav to which his grandparents emigrated from Yemen. Another evening, we visited our Ethiopian Israeli friends who are more like family to us. Enjoying the Pesach holiday with our Yemenite and our Ethiopian extended families filled me with gratitude and hope that the Jewish people can bridge our divides and once again live with mutual respect and common cause.

On the religious side things were more complicated, as they often are for me. Benjy and I attended a lovely *yom tov* service with a Conservative congregation. We helped make a minyan and they asked me to lead davening. They are sort of making it work. There was another post-denominational woman rabbi in the group. I felt at home with them. But intra-religious pluralism is *not* alive and well in Israel. From the time our plane landed, people made rude remarks about my wearing a kippah, or simply stared. I received comments such as, "do you know why I'm laughing at you?" Ask me at kiddush and I'll tell you more.

I have not touched on politics or the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Occupation is a source of shame and anger for me. But this trip, for me, was about spending sacred time with family in the land of our ancestors, resting my mind, and enjoying long stretches with my kids, cooking and playing together. Overall, the trip was Jewishly and personally rejuvenating, a joyful and necessary experience for my family and for me as your Rabbi.

When I returned to daily minyan, Anna Heifetz said, "Israel is still Israel, right?" Yes. Israel is still gorgeous, bursting with life and depth, our ancient homeland and the place where kosher food, Hebrew, the Jewish calendar, and Jewish literacy are part of the rhythm of life—along with the ongoing struggle to embody all of the hopes of her early visionaries.

I hope that we may organize a congregational trip to Israel before long. I would love to experience joyful Jewish life with you there, and I want us to engage with people who are addressing the complexities and challenges that I know trouble us.

Thank you for being a shul that can manage all of Pesach without their Rabbi. I want to extend a special hakarat hatov to the members of the Ritual Committee who ran services and gave divrei Torah in my absence.

I missed you. It's good to be home, here, with you. As we now march toward receiving Torah on Shavuot, may we all be renewed by this season. May it strengthen our sense of who we are and who we aspire to be, together.

Shabbat shalom.