

January 3, 2016  
Jerusalem

First, let's talk about Israel. Then we'll talk about our group and the stimulating trip we're having. Maybe I'll throw in a word about why I wish more of you were on this bus with us.

All Israel is upset about the horrific shooting in a Tel Aviv café two days ago, just prior to the onset of Shabbat. People are looking both ways as they go out. The police are still combing the city for the shooter, whom they've more or less identified but not located. It feels a bit like the hunt for the Boston Marathon bombers in 2013, when our son Yoni experienced a lockdown at Brandeis only a mile from the final shootout.

Except that it's nothing like that lockdown. I hear that the Tel Aviv cafes are full again, just as they were on the pleasant late evening last week when Benjie and I sat in an outdoor eatery on that very same Dizengoff Street, about three blocks from the shooting. Not only cafes are hopping, but other public spaces as well. The popular new Sarona Market (a carbon copy of New York's Chelsea Market) was so packed (on a weekday afternoon!) that we couldn't move or hear.

Our relatives in Tel Aviv and on kibbutz in the north are just going about their business: work, school, visiting, cooking, calling, food shopping. They all took us out to eat at more or less the same kind of restaurants. (I'm not sure how much more hummous, pita, shakshuka, St. Peter fish, and olives I can put away before I start looking for a bagel and shmear. Ah, I'm starting to miss the Bet Am kiddush spread!) Also, they mix reminiscences of our deceased relatives and our own previous visits with serious schmooze about politics. Always with the politics. (Israel just figured out how to send a former prime minister to jail for eighteen months – a first!)

And in Jerusalem, where we have been with our marvelous Bet Am-ers since Thursday evening, we found the restaurants and malls to be quite bustling. Maybe not with so many tourists (tourism is down 20% or so, if you don't count the hordes from Birthright buses), but certainly with natives. The natives aren't oblivious or naïve, they're just proprietary about their street life, much like the Parisians who had to go through all

of this last month. And they've seen much more of it over the years than the French (or pretty much anyone else).

All of this "attitude" make us feel pretty safe ourselves. We haven't changed any of our plans, and we haven't stalked around with an armed guard. Yes, something could happen (and not in New York?), but fear doesn't seem to be one of the sentiments prevailing in the streets of Jerusalem.

Let me share some of the sentiments we *did* discover. I think that our participants' heads are spinning. One of them keeps telling me she's on "overload." For all of them, including those who have been here numerous times, our barrage of heroic speakers has kept them thinking and re-thinking – ethically, philosophically, politically, and most certainly Jewishly. They didn't take long to start saying the word that became the motto of our last trip two years ago: "It's complicated."

At the Hartman Institute on Friday morning we studied the Jewish tradition of ethics in war with Noam Zion, one of the great Jewish educators of our day. Noam put us through head spins about conflicting traditions *within* the so-called "Tradition," to the extent that we realized we can't easily pinpoint the answers to the questions we've all been asking about how Israel teaches its soldiers to behave in combat (or even when not in combat). What pleased us was the fact that the curriculum we were sampling is part of a complex series of seminars that high-level officers go through at that very same institute, under the tutelage of Jewish teachers far more open-minded and pluralistic than the right wing rabbis who have themselves managed to convince any number of soldiers that there is one correct Jewish answer to these dilemmas, and it's usually not the kind of answer you would want either an Israeli or American soldier to carry into battle.

Our encounter with Issam Sa'ad blew their minds. He is a former Gazan (essentially a refugee from the clutches of Hamas) who now lives in Ramallah and conducts dialogues between Israelis and Palestinians, driven by the idealistic hope that knowing one another as persons will radicalize their thinking about co-existence. Some of our Bet Am-ers think he was the most inspiring of our speakers so far, though no one has given a low rating to any of the others. They desperately want us to

invite Issam to Bet Am Shalom, and to expose our teenagers to him as well as the adults.

We attended the Kabbalat Shabbat service of the fledgling community called Kehillat Tzion, led by its founder, the powerfully spiritual Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum. Tamar remembers us from her sabbatical year in White Plains at Temple Israel Center. Her service here combines musical traditions from all of the different “eydot” or origin communities that make up the Jewish population of Israel. Her Lecha Dodi alone was a virtual world tour! And in the hours following the Tel Aviv shooting, her lovingly prayerful arms were the right place for all of us to find comfort and confidence.

Our Friday night *oneg Shabbat* consisted of an intense conversation with Keshet’s founder and owner, Yitzhak Sokoloff. Yitzhak has led many of our BAS tours in Israel. He has both inspired and infuriated our groups (and in Israel those two words often mean the same thing). On Friday he gave our group one of the most helpful (if not hopeful) tours of the geopolitics of Israel and a future Palestine I’ve ever heard him give. He was “on” and we were grateful to learn from him, especially since this was the only time we’ll get to be with Yitzhak during our journey.

Today we spent the early morning overlooking Jerusalem from the Haas Promenade. From there one can see all of ancient history and modern politics in one gaze. Talk about complicated! Led by our able Keshet guide Kayla Shipp, we studied the Binding of Isaac passage from Genesis chapter 22, since that very spot is the locale in the tale where Abraham first lifts his eyes and sees “the place” from afar and makes the fateful decision to push onward. I think “fateful decisions with no satisfactory alternative” would be a good way to express the emerging theme of the trip.

Then we went to the Supreme Court and talked with a retired court justice. I think we were all touched with the colorful way he illustrated legal questions with references to Jewish sources. Nonetheless, he emphasized (and celebrated!) the fact that the Supreme Court’s complete independence from both the power politics of the secular Knesset and Coalition *and* the ecclesiastical hegemony of the Chief Rabbinate was one of the things that made Israel livable (should I say

bearable?) for moral human beings, Jew and non-Jew alike. The Court constantly hears demands that it make its decisions in light of Israel's status as a "Jewish state," though, as he skillfully explained, "Jewish state" means something entirely different to Maimonideans (the state serves religion), Spinozans (religion serves the state), and Moses Mendelsohnians (religion is entirely private and separate from state). All three are historically recognizable models of "Jewish statehood," and all three are present among the largely polarized Jewish population of Israel. Thank God for the Court (if that's not too un-secular a thing to say in this context).

We walked around town in the raw wind and mist with Rabbi Aaron Lebowitz, an Orthodox rabbi who now serves on the Jerusalem City Council as the leader of a party that fights to make the city a place where secular and liberal-religious Jews can enjoy life without adhering to the increasingly restrictive rules of the Orthodox. They work to give cafes, cinemas, and other entertainment venues the right to open or close on Shabbat as they wish, with the hope that non-Orthodox Jews will want to live (or in many cases, simply stay) in the city and not run away for lack of freedom to be secular or alternatively religious.

More impressively, he has started an alternative kosher certification called *Hashgachah Pratit* (the pun is too layered to explain here), which allows eating establishments to be certified as kosher without paying the fees or playing the demeaning games of the official Rabbinat.

We visited Avner Moriah in his stunning residence and studio just outside of town. Avner is well-known to Bet Am Shalom. It's his large exposition of the Exodus from Egypt that greets you in the hall as you approach our sanctuary. Avner gave us a meditation on art, on Israel, and on the strangely wonderful activity of reflecting Israel's (and the Jewish people's) dilemmas through a paint brush.

We ended our day with a lesson on "purity of arms" given by Retired Colonel Bentzi Gruber. (Isn't that the subject we started with?) He used vivid satellite video to show us what lengths the army goes to in order to avoid civilian deaths in Gaza and elsewhere. I know that for some of you, you're thinking that this was one of those macho IDF commanders trying to wow us with propaganda. Trust me, Bentzi is a person of great

compassion and mercy. He gives this talk not to justify everything the army does, but to show that it makes unparalleled and unprecedented efforts to do the right thing in the midst of the world's most impossible dilemmas, often to its own harm. (No good solutions, and eight seconds to shoot or not shoot.)

I asked him a potentially explosive question. I represented myself as an advocate of free speech, and as such, an opponent in principle of the Education Ministry's recent ban on allowing soldiers from the highly critical "Breaking the Silence" group to speak in Israel's high schools. The colonel agreed with me! He said that he believes Breaking the Silence started out more credibly than they have become, but that he, too, thinks that free speech and open critique of the military is important to Israel's soul. Remarkable, I thought.

Otherwise, we're singing, laughing, and taking good care of each other. Our havdalah marked the close of a warm Shabbat we shared in a cold and rainy Jerusalem. Our bus rides (actually, mini-bus rides) are filled with good discussion, and with much reminiscing about Israel visits of long ago. We've seen pictures of everyone's children and grandchildren twice over. We've quickly gelled into a chevra. Benjie and I couldn't be happier, except, of course, if more of you would have chosen to be here with us – for yourselves, for our own community back home, and for the good of our family here in Israel that needs to know we care enough to get on a plane and come on over.

More in a few days. Stay warm. I see that our balmy New York winter is about to morph into something more recognizable.

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