

Inspiration from Israel, 2019

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Israel can be infuriating. In July alone, Israel's Education Minister declared American intermarriage to be "like a second Holocaust;" he then went on to proclaim his support for conversion therapy, a cruel pseudo-psychology that purports to "cure" gays and lesbians of the same-sex attractions that animate their lives.

Tonight, though, I would like to pause from criticism of the Jewish State and even of its often-despicable government. Like our own United States, Israel is more than its government and better than its worst prejudices. Like the United States, Israel offers tremendous cause for celebration, particularly when we're prepared to examine the country in all of its complexity.

As most of you know, I spend time in Israel every year. My days there are not filled with protest marches or government-bashing. Sure, issues arise, and the Israelis and Americans with whom I share my time there are not shy about confronting harsh realities. Still, every summer, more than upset or depressed about the current state of affairs, I come away inspired by the beauty, the accomplishments, and the motivation of the Land and people of Israel.

One day of my studies at the Shalom Hartman Institute is devoted to an in-depth excursion. My group visited the Development Town of Yerucham in a remote part of the Negev. Development Towns were an invention of the early State, as it strove to find places for new immigrants to settle outside of Israel's already-crowded cities. In many cases, immigrants were dispatched to these outposts without understanding their destinations. I was reminded of our Torah portion's allocation of the Land of Israel by lottery!

One resident told of his father, a new immigrant from Morocco in the 1950s, who reported being transported to Yerucham, a rudimentary transit camp at the time. The truck driver told the immigrants to alight from the truck with their luggage so that he could repair his truck. He drove away. Our speaker's father went to his grave saying, "I'm still waiting for that truck to return."

His son, though, devoted his life to building Yerucham into a city where Israelis would choose to live. Now retired, he has lived to see industry come to

the region, bringing jobs as well as the roads to reach them. Today, Yerucham, while not Tel Aviv, is home to laborers and intellectuals, professionals and engineers.

We visited the Yerucham Science Center, meeting its director, Asaf Shalev. His goals are as ambitious as they are successful. Nominally, it's all about science: Interesting Yerucham's young people in STEM education and helping them be successful. Asaf takes his mission further, having left a most fruitful career in Israel's high-tech boom to return home and build his community. Seeking to redress the underrepresentation of women in STEM, Asaf empowers girls in projects on their own, building their confidence to join mixed teams. But Asaf doesn't stop there. The Yerucham award-winning robotics team works late into the night and travels the world to compete as a rather mixed group, not only boys and girls, but Orthodox and secular youths, Jews and Bedouins from nearby communities, all together. They have repeatedly won national competitions against much more advantaged youths. They have competed internationally in the U.S. and trained teachers in Miami and engineers in Ethiopia. You heard that right: Israeli teens from a small, remote town have trained adults who teach STEM in American schools and work as engineers in Africa.

From Yerucham, we went to Kiryat Gat, where we met Rabbi Sharon Shalom at his synagogue, Kedoshei Yisrael, founded decades ago by Holocaust survivors. Their numbers dwindled over the years as the congregation aged. They did not have a rabbi. However, they had come to know Rabbi Sharon Shalom, whose story starts in Ethiopia, not Eastern Europe.

When Rabbi Shalom immigrated, only he was able to leave without his parents. Arriving in Israel, he learned that the Chief Rabbinate considered all Ethiopian Jews of being doubtful Jews, not to mention suspected *mamzerim* – that is, born of illicit relations. Still, Sharon Shalom persevered. He studied. He did well in school. He learned traditional rabbinic texts. He was ordained as an Ashkenazic rabbi, recognized by the Chief Rabbinate, and dispatched to serve the community in Kiryat Gat. However, the local Chief Rabbi wouldn't accept him – not Orthodox enough. Discouraged but not defeated, Shalom chose academics, earning a doctorate in Jewish Thought. Finally, he was called by a congregation in need.

We met Mr. Schwartz, the *gabbai* – that is, the organizer – of the synagogue. Mr. Schwartz told us that many people challenged him: “How can you

accept a Black rabbi?" He responded: "The man traveled 2,000 miles to reach the Land of Israel. He knows Torah. And I'm going to ask about the color of his skin?"

Mr. Schwartz's attitude notwithstanding, race remains an issue in Israel. Rabbi Shalom told us that his community, about 2% of Israel's population, represents about 30% of the prison population, a story familiar to Americans. Rabbi Shalom attributes the problem to young people who lived all their lives understanding themselves to be Jews, eager to make *aliyah* to Israel. Once they arrived, they found their Jewish status in doubt and their principal, if imposed, identity to be Black, a fact of their lives that they had never previously considered. Rabbi Shalom charitably calls the issue is stigma, not racism.

I find a positive, charitable attitude in many Israelis, even those working on the most nettlesome problems. I'm inspired by our friends at Congregation Bavat Ayin, who have been fighting for their own synagogue space and land in the municipality. Their work of well over a decade may be about to pay off. Thanks to a judge's ruling, theirs may be the first Reform congregation in Israel to be provided a synagogue building, not merely land on which to build, from the municipality.

I admire my colleague, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, whom I accompanied to meet East Jerusalem families who face eviction from their homes of generations because of arcane and discriminatory laws and the zealous approach of settlers and their extremist American backers. Since the 1980s, Rabbi Ascherman has been advocating, and working on the ground, day and night, for the rights of Arabs living under Israeli control. He will not give up a mission he describes with the name of his organization, *Torat Tzedek*, meaning the Torah of Justice.

Rabbi Shalom knows that progress comes slowly, but he never loses hope. Rabbi Shalom told us of sitting under a tree as a child with his grandfather, who told the children that they would be going to Jerusalem. When asked when, Rabbi Shalom's grandfather would respond, "now." Only later, Sharon learned that his grandfather had been told by his own grandfather: "We are going to Jerusalem, now!" From this, Rabbi Shalom learns two lessons: "Number 1: Never believe an Ethiopian about time. Number 2: Nietzsche was wrong when he said, 'Hope is an illusion.'" Theodore Herzl put it another way: *Im Tirtzu, ayn zo aggadah*. "If you will it, it is no dream, to live as a free people, in the Land of Israel, in Jerusalem."

Amen.