

Visiting Israel in Difficult Times

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In the summer of 2006, rockets rained down upon the land and the people of northern Israel. Shot by Hezbollah, a terrorist organization funded and more by Iran, the rockets killed men, women, and children, Jews and Arabs alike. The attacks also terrorized Israel. Tens of thousands of Galilee residents took refuge in the south of the country, out of the range of Hezbollah's missiles.

Toni's brother Todd, his wife Karen, and their three young daughters made aliyah, moving from Kansas City to northern Israel, in 1990. Therefore, the Second Lebanon War of 2006 was personal for our family. The small, quiet community that Toni and I had so often visited was under vicious attack.

By 2006, our own children were quite small, but our Israeli nieces were all grown. The youngest, Hannah, had just entered the Israel Defense Forces. By coincidence, Hannah was stationed on a base just a half hour from home, in Acco. Her military duty was to outfit the elite soldiers as they would go off to Lebanon to root out the terrorists. When they returned, she would physically remove the equipment from the soldiers, acutely aware that not all came back to the base.

In the war of 2014, we all became knowledgeable about Israel's outstanding defenses, including an extraordinary network of bomb shelters. However, in 2006, Hannah's military base, well within reach of Hezbollah rockets, lacked any such shelter.

While many of their friends and neighbors understandably fled southward, Toni's brother Todd and our sister-in-law Karen stayed home in the Galilee. They might not be the fleeing types in any event, and they certainly wanted to be home whenever Hannah had leave. Todd would drive the half hour to pick her up at her base, so she could enjoy some rest and home cooking in their community, which does have bomb shelters.

Toni and I were glued to the news and often in contact with Karen and Todd. We were concerned for their safety. When the war ended, Toni and I had a burning desire to go to Israel. We wanted to see our family. We wanted to express our solidarity through our actions, in person. At a time when few tourists were going to Israel, we wanted to support Israel's economy. Most of all, we were glad, and we thought it important, to be with our family, our own family and the family of Israel, after a difficult time.

Israel isn't just a faraway land, and it isn't just a land associated with our Jewish people's history. Israel is the most important and the most creative, the most successful and the most difficult, project of our Jewish people in the last 2000 years. Israel stands ready to take in our people at any time of trouble, and it has harbored millions of Jews in need throughout its 67 year history: from the Holocaust refugees who helped build the State to the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who bring innovation to the nation today. Nearly half of the world's Jewish population now lives in Israel.

Too often, we are distracted from seeing the blessing that is Israel. We see the violence. We are often troubled by the way Israel approaches the Palestinian people within its borders and in occupied territory. We are infuriated by the inferior status of Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel. We are deeply offended by the treatment women receive at the hands of some extremist ultra-Orthodox Jews -- at the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site; on some buses in Israel, and even on flights to and from Israel.

Naturally, Israel often troubles, infuriates, and offends us: It's a democracy! We have the same negative reactions to events in our own country from time to time. Still, we love our own country and we must remain committed to the welfare of the Jewish State.

This past summer, rockets rained down on Israel once again. This time, the south was threatened, along with the country's major population centers in the center of the country, where our nieces and their significant others live. Even though they had to scurry to bomb shelters repeatedly, their lives went on pretty much as normal.

As in 2006, Toni and I kept in contact with our family during the war, while I was also concerned about young people from our congregation who were participating in summer programs in Israel. Then, while the war yet raged, a surprise announcement came from Israel: Our oldest Israeli niece, Ruth, would be married in two weeks' time. Like her parents before her, Ruth would be married on short notice in the presence of parents and siblings only, so we weren't faced with deciding whether to buy last minute plane tickets to go to Israel during a war.

I suspect that Ruth and her new spouse Amit would say that their marriage was not a statement. They got married because their relationship had reached the moment when they wanted to sanctify it under the *chuppah*. Still, I couldn't help but think of the Holocaust survivors who married in Displaced Persons Camps in 1945. No, this past summer's war was no Holocaust, but it was existentially threatening to the people of Israel, bombarded simultaneously by rockets and by infuriating and unjustified opprobrium from supposedly civilized governments -- the United States, Canada, and Australia being the few notable exceptions. The wedding of Amit and Ruth was, whether they meant it or not, an affirmation of their future and Israel's.

Toni and I were eager to go to Israel, again in the aftermath of a war, this time with Robert and Daniel. We mustered our frequent flyer points and made our reservations. Then, in the late fall, tensions rose and terrorism reared its ugly head. Would this be a safe time to bring our family to Israel? If Gus Block got a vote, we would certainly choose a peaceful beach somewhere instead!

Thankfully, the terrorism stopped. For now. We hosted a dinner party in Tel Aviv to fete the newlyweds. We spent Shabbat in the family home in the north. And we spent three days in Jerusalem, which to some extent we treated as a giant, open air jewelry store and art gallery. We took our boys on their first-ever guided tours in Israel, visiting sites of ancient and modern Jerusalem. We even went to a couple of places that were new to me. Robert and I got a workout climbing a tall Lutheran church tower in the heart of the Old City of Jerusalem, with spectacular views of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holy sites.

I have been to Israel more times than I can count. Despite the recent war and the difficult religious tensions that have besieged Jerusalem with terror in recent months, Israel felt as it always does. All of our Israeli family is busy with work and school. Malls are full of shoppers, Jews and Arabs patronizing the same stores. We had a great lunch in an Arab village. We were blessed with magnificent weather, which can't be taken for granted in the winter. I was most pleased to see missions from some of the largest Reform synagogues in the U.S., including our friends from Memphis with Rabbi Greenstein.

On Wednesday night, during our final Jerusalem dinner before heading to the airport, our sister-in-law Karen called to say good-bye. She was on her way to another wedding of an American-born Israeli to a native, another symbol of young Israelis' faith in their nation's future.

Karen spoke to each of us. To me, she offered thanks, telling me how grateful she was and how much it meant that we had come to Israel now. Karen understands: It's not easy, even though it's important, to go to Israel in difficult times.

We can all help Israel, at this challenging times -- and, God willing, in better times to come.

Israelis will be going to the polls in March. Again. We are planning a special program four weeks from tonight, January 30: A Shabbat service, abbreviated by not having a sermon, followed by an Israeli style dinner. Then, I will take you through the ins and outs of the Israeli elections, so different from our own system. Also, next Sunday morning at 10am, Phil Spivey will conclude his captivating series about modern Zionism, Israel, and Jewish identity. Then, on February 8, I plan to discuss *My Promised Land* by Ari Shavit, the most important book written about Israel in many years. The more we know about Israel, the better we can answer our friends' questions, representing and supporting Israel in Arkansas.

Naturally, we can't vote in Israel's elections. However, we can vote in the World Zionist Organization elections in February. These elections really matter, particularly in terms of support for our growing Reform Movement in Israel. I have postcards, which I implore you to complete, the first step toward registering and voting for ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America. Recent years' giant leaps forward by Reform Judaism in Israel -- and, by extension, for women's rights -- have been due in no small measure to American Reform Jews casting their votes for ARZA.

We can also go to Israel. Our vacation renewed my desire to plan a congregational mission to Israel, perhaps a spring trip during our congregation's sesquicentennial year of 2016. Each and every one of us owes ourselves an experience in Israel, to see for ourselves, to be with our people in our ancestral land, to renew our bonds with one another and with our Jewish people everywhere. Make no mistake: Like my sister-in-law Karen, the people of Israel feel the love.

Toni, Robert, Daniel and I traveled to Israel in what might officially be called difficult times. But it didn't feel difficult. It felt like a vacation. It was a family reunion, not just for our Dollinger family, but with the family of Israel. We come home exhausted but exhilarated, jet-lagged but rejuvenated. We wish the same for each and every one in our holy congregation.

Amen.