

Journeys in Israel: 2022

Shabbat Matot-Mas'ei 5782

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Two weeks ago tonight, I had an entirely new and frightening experience. I welcomed Shabbat with our friends at Congregation Bavat Ayin, in Rosh HaAyin. That was **not** scary. Rabbi Ayala Shashoua Miron asked me to explain what's going on in the United States with abortion rights. She and the congregation were mystified, as are many Israelis. Abortion rights in Israel are broad and largely noncontroversial. Israelis are not used to the United States offering less freedom, apparently on the basis of religion, than Israel.

I still haven't gotten to the terrifying part. Unless you are new to Congregation B'nai Israel tonight, you know that I am comfortable speaking about abortion rights. Before coming to Arkansas, I was Board chair of a Planned Parenthood affiliate in South Texas, and I have written and edited published works on the topic.

Still, I was terrified. I would be discussing the topic **in Hebrew**. No, I didn't **have** to. I could've spoken in English, and the rabbi and others would've translated for me—as they did, in fact, when I couldn't find a word I needed. Thank goodness for Google Translate, since I didn't know the Hebrew word for “abortion.” *Hapala*, thank you very much, is now etched on my brain.

The Torah portion that week was *Pinchas*, named for a religious zealot who murders a couple for the “crime” of sexual relations between an Israelite and a Midianite. The Torah honors that zealotry, but it is analogous to the extremism that is increasingly taking rights away from pregnant people and transgender youth, with more victims in its sights.

In short, I was comfortable with my subject matter—even off the cuff, without preparation, which is not my norm—but not so much with the language. Improving my conversational Hebrew, after a three-year pandemic-induced absence from Israel, was a goal of mine for my three weeks there this summer. Still, thanks in no small measure to a friendly and forgiving congregation, I did it!

New experience, going outside my comfort zone, was a welcome if unexpected motif of my time in Israel this year. That theme fits this week's Torah portion, *Matot-Mas'ei*, at the conclusion of the Book of Numbers. *Mas'ei* is translated as “marches,” but it could just as well mean “journeys,” as the portion recounts the Israelites' steps in the months before they reach the Promised Land.

Moses confronts experiences he does not expect. Two tribes petition to settle on the east side of the Jordan River, technically outside the Land of Israel. Moses reacts poorly at first. He assumes that the Gadites and Reubenites are seeking to abandon the other Israelites in their hour of need, as they must conquer the Land. The tribes respond, though, that they're prepared to fight on the front lines, only that they want to return to fertile lands east of the river after the war. Many lessons have been drawn from this vignette, but the one I would suggest tonight is that "unexpected" and "bad" are not synonyms. Challenges must be accepted, and then confronted fully and forthrightly, before they can be brought to resolution.

A sermon in Hebrew was not my only new experience this summer in Israel. I have had very little experience visiting the occupied West Bank, confronting the challenges on the ground there. My son Robert joined me on July 4th, as we went to the South Hebron Hills for a day organized by T'ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Justice.

I already *knew* that the West Bank Occupation is unjust, poses daily indignities to Palestinians, and is as much a detriment to Israel's security as to its soul. Seeing with my own eyes the Israeli attempt to drive Palestinians out of the rural area surrounding the West Bank Palestinian city of Yatta, though, brought the harsh reality home.

Robert, my colleagues, and I met Hamdan, an exemplar of resilience in the face of often insurmountable challenges. A man with a college education who has forgone opportunities for what most people would call a "better life" outside Palestine, Hamdan nevertheless continues to rebuild his home and reestablish access to the fields and water that belong to his family and community.

When Jewish Israelis build illegal settlements—that is, illegal under Israeli law—the Army establishes wide security zones around them, blocking Palestinians' access to their own lands. By contrast, when Palestinians rebuild their ancestral homes without a permit, the Army often demolishes them.

Even **if** we accepted arguments that the West Bank Occupation cannot safely be ended now, Israel need not tolerate settlers' illegal outposts, and it need not be so cruel to Palestinians living on their ancestral land. After this experience, I am, now more than ever, committed to the ongoing effort to shine a light on the *tikkun*, the repair, that Israel must undertake to vouchsafe its future and save its soul.

As part of my studies at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I learned with Donniel Hartman, who is increasingly concerned with Israel's projection of power. He points to the Genesis creation story, which vests humans with power to rule the Earth **and** emphasizes that every human being is created

b'tzelem Elohim, in the divine image. As an Israeli military veteran, Rabbi Hartman worries that his nation's demonstrations of might do not treat Palestinians as fellow human beings, equally *b'tzelem Elohim*.

I saw that when I made my first-ever visit to Lod on a Hartman daytrip to a city where Jewish and Palestinian Israelis live side-by-side in the same apartment buildings. Also known in Arabic as Lyd and by its British name, Lydda, the city was the site of a terrible massacre of Palestinians during the 1948 War of Independence. (There were also horrific massacres of Jews during that war.) Just over a year ago, violence broke out there again. Meeting Jews and Palestinians who are devoted to coexistence, even at personal risk, I was heartened. Meeting Palestinians who will not accept a Jewish State that they view as a colonial imposition upon their land and people, and meeting Orthodox Zionist Nationalists who have settled in the city with the goal of “judaizing” it, I was brought back to the reality that the opponents of coexistence continue to rule the day.

Perhaps the least likely of my journeys in Israel this summer was my two-day retreat to the Arava, the southern Negev desert, with a group from Hebrew Union College. A seminar organized by my own seminary does not sound like a departure from my comfort zone, but it was. I would not, of my own devices, awaken to greet the dawn at 5:30am. I would typically regard an assignment to express myself with a collage or with clay as, well, silly. And I would not be comfortable with a task to speak out loud to God and, later, to a deceased relative, for thirty minutes, with a clear direction to keep talking nonstop, no matter what.

No, your left-brained, analytical rabbi is not about to become all right-brained and creative. Still, I am grateful for all the opportunities this summer's sabbatical in Israel afforded me: not only my usual, appreciated as much as always—studying with colleagues and scholars at Hartman and walking mile after mile on the sun-drenched boardwalk aside the Tel Aviv beach—but also giving a sermon in Hebrew, exploring parts of Israel and the Occupied Territories that make me uncomfortable, and opening myself up to experiencing my own soul in new ways.

Matot-Mas'ei and the Book of Numbers end with a disappointing passage. Earlier, we had learned of the first-ever documentation of inheritance rights for women. Now, Moses is confronted with another unexpected challenge: What to do about a woman who inherits, who may marry a man from another tribe, thereby transferring the land she receives from the tribe of her birth to the tribe of her husband. Torah's response limits women's rights, all too familiar to us in 2022, even if the particulars are different: these biblical women were required to marry only within their own clans.

And then, the Book of Numbers ends, as has my 2022 summer journey in Israel. Still, neither Torah nor Jewish history nor my own journey has ended. The answer that seems final now may not be the last. We take this occasion to affirm, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*, “Strong. Strong. Let us strengthen one another.” Let all of our journeys, however challenging and even disquieting, leave us dreaming of a better future.

Amen.