

This summer, erev Tisha B'av, I headed out in a taxi in Jerusalem to participate in a Masorti movement sponsored reading of the book of Eicha, Lamentations. Tisha B'av commemorates, among other things, the destruction of the first and second Temples and subsequent exiles, and the expulsion of the Jewish community from Spain in 1492. The non-kippah wearing driver of the taxi I entered was listening to the radio, to a song with an unfamiliar, Arabic sounding, cadence, and words that sounded almost but not quite like Hebrew. I admit to a twinge of worry, when I thought I might have gotten into an Arab taxi by mistake, so I asked the driver what kind of music was playing on the radio. It turns out that it was a radio program featuring a prominent Sephardic rabbi chanting kinot, liturgical elegies mourning the loss of the Temple. The melody and Hebrew pronunciation came from a Middle Eastern or North African community, which explained both why I didn't understand the words, and why it sounded vaguely Arabic. I thought to myself -- Where else in the world is the culture so thoroughly steeped in Judaism, its calendar, its history, its memories and its values, that a secular Jew would be listening to elegantly written poems composed 1000 or 1500 years ago, for a holiday that is certainly not one of the most well observed, mourning the destruction of what is now a thriving city, larger than it has ever been at any point in its history?

In a nutshell, this is what draws me to Israel - the fact that it is a country so steeped in Yiddishkeit that every breath of air is an infusion of Judaism. This is why I, a Jew who has chosen to live outside of Eretz Yisrael, need to make periodic visits to Israel. After too much time away, I can feel my spiritual life beginning to wither.

Being a Jew in West Michigan – or even in Detroit, Chicago, or New York – is a constant battle to maintain one's Jewish identity. Sure, we can have rich spiritual lives here in Grand Rapids, but without a periodic infusion of Judaism from another source we will slowly but surely weaken. That is why we have a Jewish cultural council bringing in musicians, lecturers, and other programs from outside; that is why we have a Jewish Theater, challenging us with ideas from playwrights around the country; that is why we have a Synagogue with various services and educational programs, and a Jewish Federation, both of whom do their share of bringing in scholars, speakers and ideas from around the country and the world. And that is why I go to conferences and seminars, to search out what is new and what is old in the Jewish world, and bring it back to Grand Rapids.

We can and we do renew and restore ourselves by plugging into the synagogue, into Jewish community programs, into artist and scholar in residence programs, into music and theater, and programs of learning. These are important parts of our Jewish spiritual diet. We are surrounded, however, by a culture that does not really belong to us. Although we have adopted parts, or even most of it, American culture is rooted in a Christian ethos, sometimes more explicitly in-your-face, sometimes more subtle, but ultimately making up what we call civil religion or secular society. I want to suggest that ultimately, the only source that can thoroughly reinvigorate our Judaism here in the Diaspora is that which comes from Israel.

A Jew is like a cell phone which can run for some time on its battery, but periodically needs to return to its base for recharging. If it is not recharged, eventually it will lose the strength to make a connection with its cell tower, and thus not be able to make or receive calls. So too, Diaspora Jews can enjoy rich spiritual lives, but without periodically reconnecting with Israel, our base, we will inevitably weaken and lose the ability to sustain a connection with the Divine along Jewish pathways.

For 1900 years, during which there was no Jewish control over Israel and most of the worldwide Jewish community lived in exile, we sustained ourselves via a connection to Israel found in Torah, Haftarah readings, and liturgical prayers. The spiritual “recharging unit” became the memory of our Jerusalem, our Israel.

A search of the words Zion and Jerusalem turned up 799 occurrences in the Tanakh alone. Chapter 2 of Isaiah (2:1-3) begins:

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of Adonai’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Then many people shall go and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of Adonai, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; [and as we say when we take the Torah from the Aron,] for from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of Adonai from Jerusalem.

כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תּוֹרָה וּדְבַר-ה' מִירוּשָׁלַם, יִשְׁעִיהָ פֶּרֶק בִּג:

Every Shabbat and festival, we preface the Birkat Hamazon with Psalm 126, depicting the joyful state of the Jewish community returning to the land of Israel after a period of exile. [Psalm 126:1-2]

A Song of ascents. When Adonai brought [us] back [from] the captivity of Zion, it was as if we were dreaming. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing; then they said among the nations, ‘Adonai has done great things for them.’

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת-שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הִינְנוּ כְּחֹלְמִים: אִזּוּ יִמְלֵא שְׁחֹק פִּינוּ וְלִשׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה אִזּוּ יֹאמְרוּ בְּגוֹיִם הַגְּדִיל ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת עִם-אֱלֹהִים, תִּהְיִים קְכוּא-ב

Our Siddur, as well as the High Holiday Maḥzor, uses images of Jerusalem to remind God of our historic covenant through Abraham. From the Zikhronot section of the Musaf Amidah:

For our sake remember Your lovingkindness and Your covenant with Abraham our father on Mount Moriah [the hill in Jerusalem on which the Temple mount sits]. Recall how Abraham subdued his compassion to do Your will whole-heartedly, binding his son Isaac on the altar; subdue Your wrath with your compassion.

And from the end of the song that concludes the Musaf Amidah, known by its refrain *Hayom*, “today,” the prophet Isaiah depicts Jerusalem in a perfected, Messianic world, as a center for all religions, not just Judaism:

Upon a day like this bring us rejoicing to Jerusalem restored, together with all who serve you in love, as declared by Your prophet Isaiah, “I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer... and my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. [Isaiah 56:7].”

In modern literature, among the many poems and essays about Israel, we have the powerful poem named *Hatikva*, meaning “the hope,” written by Naftali Herz Imber (1856-1909), who moved to Palestine in 1882 from Galicia. Its lyrics express our undying hope, through the long years of exile, that we would someday return to independence in our homeland.

We have not lost our hope,
The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free nation in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

עוֹד לֹא אֲבָדָה תְּקוּתֵינוּ,

הַתְּקֵנָה שְׁנוֹת אֲלֵפִים,
 לְהִיּוֹת עִם הַכּוֹפֵשׁ בְּאַרְצֵנוּ,
 אֶרֶץ צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.

In 1948, when the *tikva* became a reality, it again became possible for Jews around the world to plug back into the unique spiritual reservoir that is Eretz Yisrael. We no longer need to rely on the dream alone, or sacred texts alone, to sustain us. We can actually go and see the real thing. Indeed, there is something discordant about continuing to pray for a return as if it were still only a dream, rather than going to experience the land of our ancestors with our own senses. My friends, last year I said that this is a critical time for the survival of Israel. This summer, I lingered in a kosher Chinese restaurant that primarily catered to tourists twice over lunchtime, and was almost the only customer for over an hour each time. A shop owner in the center of town was so desperate to sell me a pair of sandals that I bought them, even though I didn't really need them. The empty restaurants and stores catering to tourists are not being aided by your federation gifts - they will only survive if you bring yourself to Israel. But this is also a critical time for the spiritual survival of the Jewish community. We are putting ourselves at risk by staying **away** from Israel. This is why it is so vital for us to make a periodic visit to Israel part of our lives, as long as we are physically and financially able. There is a Grand Rapids mission scheduled again this year; there is a thriving Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem which would love to host visitors for a two week or Semester long study visit; or perhaps the best way to go -- pick up a guidebook, a Hebrew phrasebook, stay at a hotel or bed and breakfast in Jerusalem, just go, breathe the air, walk the streets, and recharge your spiritual batteries. The sparks of Judaism you find lying in the corners of the alleyways of Israel are many times more powerful than the most engaging Jewish institutions in the diaspora; that's why the birthright Israel program offers a free Israel trip to any young Jew age 18-26 who has not yet visited - trips to Israel are by far the best way to sustain a Jewish identity.

I realize that in terms of safety, you may have very valid concerns about travel to Israel. All I can say is that when I was in Israel this summer, taking reasonable precautions, never did I feel unsafe. In any case, for those who are not prepared to visit Israel at this time because of security concerns, there are certainly other things you can do, such as participating in the Sisterhood Israel program on the 19th, where you will certainly be able to find more information about how to support Israel from here. We can also lend our support in the form of prayer -- let us recall the words of the Prayer for the State of Israel that we pray every Shabbat:

Our Father in heaven, Rock and Redeemer of the people Israel: Bless the State of Israel, the dawn of our redemption. Shield it with your love; spread over it the shelter of your peace. Guide its leader and advisors with Your light and Your truth. Help them with Your good counsel. Strengthen the hands of those who defend our holy land. Deliver them; crown their efforts with triumph. Bless the land with peace, and its inhabitants with lasting joy. And let us say, Amen.