

Nearly nine years ago, I had moved to New York City to begin my second year as a cantorial student at Hebrew Union College. I had just completed my first year of study in the program in Jerusalem, where cantorial, rabbinic, and education students from the three US campuses of HUC all converge for their first year of intense study in Israel. A year later, I delivered a sermon that spoke about the many highs and lows we experienced as students in Israel from June, 2001 through April, 2002. We lived through the experience of 9/11 and repeated terrorism and violence related to the 2nd Intifada in Israel. It was a time of great turmoil in the world, and yet we found community both within and outside the walls of our school. And, we certainly found unity in our experience of day-to-day life in Israel. We came face-to-face with so many of the challenges that Israel has faced in its valiant and brave resistance to attacks on its ability to survive. Well, clearly, Israel has never lost its will, and it is still surviving through trial after trial. It is truly a land of great blessing and miracles.

Today, Israel is a different place than it was 10 years ago. The world is certainly a different place. And, when Rabbi Cohen returns in two weeks, she will have much to report and to say about living in Israel for six weeks this summer and how Israel finds itself today. Fortunately, and for

the most part, Israel is at greater peace than it was when I lived there. Although, there are still many constant struggles, as we think as recent as last week as we stand with Israel remembering those killed and injured in brutal attacks in the south. Israel has rarely known a time that it did not have great internal and external political struggles and the necessity for a never-waning alertness in its battle to survive.

In my first year of my student pulpit at Temple Beth-El of Jersey City, NJ, I delivered this sermon reminiscing about the experiences I had had the previous year. I kept a vivid journal that entire year, which informed this sermon and on two occasions, it is quoted from. Whenever we revisit things we have written in the past, we often see how we have changed since then. And, in a way, this is like reading a journal within a journal. There are certainly places I would love to rewrite and make them sound better, or perhaps wiser, than I think they do.

But, I have left everything as it was, representing who I was then and leaving you with an accurate picture of how I was reflecting on my experiences. I was very proud of this sermon back then, and I still am.

## **A Sermon on our Year in Israel**

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On June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001, I set forth on a new journey in my life. The main path was into my training to become a cantor, but as I set forth on the physical flight to Tel Aviv that day, before me lay a path that was exciting, yet scary, knowing that I would be living in a foreign country for an entire year. What lay before me at that time, I could not have really known: The amount I would grow as an individual, The amount I would learn about myself, about Judaism, about this special country. For as time would come to pass amidst my experiences in my Year in Israel, I soon came to know that there are many parts of oneself that cannot be explored until one is placed in a foreign country, surrounded by the odd and the strange. While some of these things are initially whimsical, one must confront and overcome these foreign obstacles and make them a part of daily life. In Israel, this included living with the ever present situation of terror, which in Hebrew we came to know as “the *matzav*.”

I think it is vital to begin by expressing how magical living in Israel was for us so much of the time. When I arrived home and was showing pictures of my trip to a friend, she was amazed that amongst my pictures, everything wasn't in ruins. She delighted in pictures of the beautiful gardens of the Bahai Temple in Haifa, entertaining her prior thoughts that the entire country was in upheaval, ready for its final destruction. I showed her that Israel then and today was a living and thriving country whose very existence has always been a struggle, but this struggle has never conquered the love and beauty that the country has upheld. For me, Israel taught upon and opened me up to a new level of spirituality. Where else in the world is the sake of being Jewish so utterly definable and visible through every major or minor detail of daily life? Everyone in our class always reveled at taking a trip even to the grocery store. There, the season and time of year was always immediately noticeable. Around Rosh Hashanah, the entrance to the store was packed with sweets galore, including stacks of special packages of chocolate celebrating the sweetness of the new year. Then in the Winter, Hanukkah had taken over not only in the grocery store, but at every bakery as well. My friend Rachael and I clearly remember our trip to the mall in southern

Jerusalem, where on our trip to see the opening night of Harry Potter (complete with Hebrew subtitles!), we bought our very first *sufganiyot*, which were hot and straight out of the oven. These treats which replace our *latkes* are fried donuts filled with jelly, caramel, or chocolate. Gosh were they good! And at the last of my culinary memories, I distinctly remember taking a trip to the grocery store during Pesach, where a good percentage of the shelves had been covered over in large butcher paper marking the aisles as “*chametz*” and unavailable for purchase. Yet, in front of these aisles, were rows of little baskets filled with snack after snack—all Kosher for Pesach.

Living in Israel brought me into a new realm of perspective on what it is like to be an Israeli. While I will say that dealing with Israelis sometimes can be a challenge for an American, there were also, time and time again, so many wonderful Israelis who became a part of my life. Early on in the year, I was invited to share Shabbat with a family who lived in the ultra-orthodox sector of Jerusalem known as *Mea Shearim*. To understand the importance of Shabbat in this family’s life, you should know that this family invites over an average of 50 people per week for their Shabbat dinner. The family once offered to

their kids a break from their tradition, but the kids denied this. They said that without their dinners, they would just be bored! The dinner was filled with people from all walks of life-- Women, men, yeshiva boys, men in black hats and *peas*, young and old alike... People were speaking Hebrew, English, and even Spanish next to me. At the end of the dinner, the father of the family, who was also a Rabbi, stood up to give a small d'var Torah. Amidst his speech, he spoke of one time when he had forgotten to daven his Mincha prayers in the Afternoon. He had to recite them before sundown, even though he was quite late in doing so already. So, he went to the nearest synagogue which ended up being the Hasidic Yeshiva of Gor. He went into the service, and then noticed that hundreds, if not thousands of people were all converging at the same time and heading up to the synagogue. He noted this was pretty odd. They had all forgotten to do their mincha prayers? So, he went into the synagogue and it was full. They started the service, and there was a service leader. He noticed that the rebbe of the Gor community must have been sitting on the bimah. Yet, the **leader of the service** seemed to keep blocking his view. He couldn't see the chair where the rebbe was sitting. So, this Rabbi got frustrated and eventually left,

not getting to see the rebbe of Gor. He then ran into a friend of his on his way out. And, the friend said, "Why are you leaving?" Our host proceeded to explain himself, and the friend said, "This is the one service of the month that the rebbe leads!" Our host was laughing and said that this taught him that the idea that we are always looking for that one, specific "someone else" is a falsehood. Often, the person or thing we are looking for is right there before our own eyes. That Shabbat was truly magical, for as I walked home with my friend Steve, we stood amidst the streets of *Mea Shearim*, which now devoid of any car traffic, were filled with Hasidim passing through the intersection every which way. And, each of them as they passed wished us a hearty "Shabbat Shalom."

As the year continued, and the *matzav* continued to get worse, we continued to take extra steps to ensure our own safety—steps we had pretty much been taking since day one. This included taking cabs instead of buses and avoiding crowded places. While Israelis seemed to go on with their lives in a mostly normal fashion, we would often question our own need to have dinner at a certain restaurant one night or to go to a café on another. We had lives to come home

to back in the US-- other cafes to frequent, other restaurants in which to dine . . . a safety net, so-to-speak. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the Israelis. In tune with my understanding the differences in being an Israeli, I was now discovering the challenges of what it meant to be an American outside of the U.S. For the first time in my life, being an American was a stereotype of its own. I was beginning to forget that each of my classmates and I had come from a different area of the U.S. Where I used to call myself a Chicagoan, here being an American was one and the same in the eyes of some Israelis. I had begun to develop a new sensitivity of what it meant to be a foreigner. I felt that because I too had struggled with a new language and new concepts, I now had a new understanding for what it meant to be a foreigner in the U.S.—to struggle with speaking English and understanding the cultural concepts of America.

The *matzav* continued, and there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel. By this time, in addition to the great knowledge we had acquired in terms of Judaic and cantorial studies, I was also quite proficient at telling the difference between the sound of a bomb going off, and the sound of a sonic boom, fireworks, or just loud

construction. The fact was all of these sounds were incredibly similar. But, the sound of bombing was almost always followed by deathly silence, and then the sound of sirens and ambulances. Just as you too did here, we turned on the TV and radio to hear news of attacks or *piguim* throughout the country, and there within our own city of Jerusalem, they happened often just steps away. Yet, often we woke up at night to the rolling sounds of nearby Bethlehem being bombed only miles away. With the floors shaking and our windows shuddering, there were few of us who returned to sleep calmly. The certainty that anyone could guarantee themselves safety wasn't promised unless one did not step outside of their apartment. Still, we felt that within reason, we could logically decide where and when we should and should not be. We were spending a lot of time safely at each other's places as well. Between us and our family and friends at home, a gap in our communication grew wider. It was impossible for them to understand the true nature of our own individual situations without actually being there in our shoes. Many of us were asked time and time again to return home. Meanwhile, leaders of our own movement visited us and applauded our being there. Their words and feelings were spoken truthfully, but as we were praised and then

abandoned again and again, it became hard for us to truly appreciate the support.

On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the straw finally arrived which broke the camel's back. A devastating attack occurred at the Moment café, a place visited regularly by many of my classmates and which was located steps from all of our doors. Our program formally came to a bittersweet and incredibly sudden close, three months sooner than we had expected. With mixed emotions, we saw our year coming to a close, our friends leaving the country for good, and we were now looking back on the journey we had only started 9 months earlier. I kept a journal throughout the year, and here is what I wrote on a trip, revisiting Café Moment a month later:

These days, whether or not I leave my apartment, the evidence of history passing and knocking on my door is further evident. If I sit at home, I turn on CNN, and a news report on the Middle East and most likely featuring Israel and the Palestinian Authority is bound to pass by within the hour. Once I leave my apartment and become part of the Israeli society beyond my door, history is too abundant. I saw this

today, walking down the street. On my way to the nearby ATM, I walked past the former spot of Moment. Two weeks after the bombing, the café ceases to exist. I realized that I had walked right by it the other night on my way home from our Passover seder without realizing it was there. Where once stood a cutely quaint coffee house, with a small porch in front, today is just a stone wall perimeter, all windows, doors, and the whole façade of the café—gone. I took a moment to look at the skeleton which remained, haunted by the fact that I too was there once with friends a couple months back. As I trace the gravel floor which remains, I see the bar in the middle, and between two posts, stairs which descended to a slightly lowered level, fitted with comfy couches and chairs, where our group had comfortably convened itself. In the back of what remains of Moment is the bathroom, still tightly fit into the back wall, perhaps the one thing that remained untouched in the destruction of the café. A mirror hangs slanted off the wall, while inside and outside of the café's remains are Yahrzeit candles and large blue and white Israeli flags. A few signs note the former physical or mental thought presence of a couple of American organizations wishing their well to

the inexistent café. A final memoir from the café itself notes: “We are crying, we are crying, but we continue forward. –Moment Café.”

And not long thereafter, I packed up my stuff, and took my last walk through Jerusalem. I recalled so many of the highs and lows we experienced during our quite remarkable stay, and I wrote this final story in my journal of that year—a fitting story which I will share with you now:

And so it goes, and so it goes...

A little bit after September 11<sup>th</sup>, I reached into my jacket and found an old Extra brand gum wrapper. I smiled to myself thereafter, noticing that I had left this piece of garbage in my coat before I had left for Israel. It was a silly, little trifle thing. Only a piece of trash—yet it symbolized so much for me of the time I was having then and the time which approaches now.

I put the wrapper back in the pocket, snug deep within.

From the day I found the gum wrapper, I decided that I wouldn't throw it out until I reached the states. Today, I pulled my cell phone out of

my pocket, and there the gum wrapper was, clinging to the bottom of the phone. Ah, I remembered. Yes, the promise holds true.

Only a little more than a week left, dear piece of crinkled paper.

You too will find your home.

The time of departure, almost as uncanny as any other part of this year, has come at a different point of expectation, but is equally dealt a feeling of happiness and the moving sorrow that comes with anyone's point of departure onto a new moment in a life's journey. I feel that I am moving towards being fully ready for every new adventure and challenge awaiting me on the other side of the sea. I am full of excitement to return where I will be gilded with the richness of all the things we take for granted just because we live in America. I feel that I have made the best of everything in every way possible for me this year in Israel. I will reflect and look upon this year for the rest of my life, learning new things about it day by day. But, I already know that being here in a foreign country has opened me up to so many new things, and forced me to think and evaluate many parts of my life that formerly remained untouched.

I am excited to return home as a more mature, more eye-opened person. A person who understands more of the challenges this world faces; a person who has seen the variety of the world's faith in itself, in its people, in its religions, in its humanity as well as its lack thereof.

I am truly ready to start a new era in my life. I hope this era will be just as eye-opening and challenging, but present me with just as much richness, love, and character as before.

When I return home and toss out this gum wrapper, I will have come full circle. With just as much a smile and feeling of warmth that I had when I found the wrapper in the beginning will I lay the wrapper to rest. It will symbolize my homecoming, and the start of this new era.

[So,] The next time you discover a small piece of trash you laid aside in your jacket, pocket, or purse, realize that it is connected to a former time in your life—when you were slightly different and now you are slightly modified. Whether for the better or for the worse, this does not matter. For it is the very idea that recognizing that one cannot roll in the grass without allowing some of that grass to cling to you, to stain you, and to slightly perfume you. We carry our experiences with us, and by their hand we can listen and learn, and we can ultimately

find ourselves amidst our ultimate dreams and desires if we only  
unwrap the outer layer and carry it with us, feeling its weight, its  
importance, and its need until the time is up.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon, May This Be God's Will.      Shabbat Shalom.