

## **Looking for the Oldest Jewish Man or Woman Who Hasn't Yet Been to Israel**

**by Jerry Gould**

For some years my wife has been telling me that I was the oldest Jewish man in Newton, Massachusetts who has never visited Israel. Although I doubt that this was really the case (I'm only 53 after all), let's just take it to be true for the purposes of what I am about to say. If it *was* true, it is no longer, because I am writing this on my return flight – an El AL jet jostling its bumpy way across the north Atlantic on November 17, 2002. Of course, in the light of the past year and a half's terror and confusion, many of my friends and family asked me the same question – "Why now?" I had no ready answer except that I felt this was the right time. I have given a lot of thought to this question during my week there. I went as one of the two hundred and eighty people in the CJP/JCRC [Combined Jewish Philanthropies/Jewish Community Relations Council] Solidarity Mission sent by the Greater Boston Community. I wondered if I would find a clearer answer in Israel.

You should understand that we talked with and heard speeches from many prominent Israelis from government, media and academia and we managed a fair amount of sightseeing as well. The holy sights and antiquities would have been enough reason to go. The dignitaries were all impressive and many were absolutely inspiring. There were also genuinely touching ceremonial occasions. One of these had us visiting kindergarten children from Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and other former Soviet countries. Another took us to a hospital where we met doctors and nurses who worked to save lives on both sides of the conflict with equal zeal and bravery. The most emotional ceremony brought us into contact with the simple courage and modesty of the soldiers, many of them still nursing wounds, to whom the CJP contributed scholarships. The scholarships were intended to compensate in some way for the time that these student-soldiers lost when they were taken from their universities during the last call-up of the reserves.

Any one of those experiences would have more than justified the tiny risk involved in a visit to Israel; but they didn't really address that original question "Why now?" It was in serendipitous one-on-one conversations with regular Israelis though, that I found the most compelling reason that now is the time to visit.

I had the good fortune to visit with two Israeli families in their homes while I was there. The first visit was as part of the CJP-sponsored tour. Four Americans from the tour were assigned to each of dozens of volunteer families who invited us into their homes for an evening. The Boston CJP arranged for these visits so that we could be part of the ongoing "sister city" program of personal and organizational contact between Boston and Haifa. My other home visit in Israel was with old friends who live on the border with Lebanon. Many of us on the trip spent some time with family, friends, acquaintances or friends of friends who were so happy to have visitors that the only question of personal safety that any of us experienced on this trip was that we might have been in danger of being killed with kindness or forced to eat ourselves to death on the wonderful and unbelievably abundant hospitality of our hosts.

I know Rikki and Shimon because they had been close friends of my wife when she lived in Israel years ago. Cathy lived in Israel for twelve years and since she came back to the states has lost touch with many of her friends from those days, but Rikki and Shimon have been good and constant friends. They have accepted me as a friend too and they have stayed with us a couple of times on visits to the US. They live in the Kibbutz of Rosh HaNikra which is set on the side of a mountain. The top of this mountain is the place where the border of Lebanon comes across the crest of a ridgeline and plunges down the western side to meet the Mediterranean Sea. That last precipitous drop-off is actually a blazing white chalk cliff.

That dazzling white cliff, the flat sweeping curve of the beach that runs away toward the south and the ancient port of Akko, the shimmering sea to the west and the craggy mountains and hills to the north and east, make Rosh HaNikra a startlingly beautiful place. Right there, where all of this natural beauty comes together, the kibbutz community nestles into the flank of the mountain with a view that rivals anything else in the world.

Unfortunately, you are never the only one enjoying the view. At the summit of the mountain, two observation towers stand cheek-to-cheek bellied right up against the border. One on either side, they are positioned slightly offset to each other so that each can see beyond the other into the territory behind it. One tower is manned by Israeli soldiers and the other by Hizbollah terrorists. Although they have been relatively quiet in recent months, an occasional rocket attack still comes across from the Lebanon side. Just this past March a pair of terrorists that were presumed to be Hizbollah infiltrated across the border dressed in Israel Defense Force uniforms. They set themselves up on a hill that commands a clear view of a road intersection that all of the civilian (and none of the military) traffic uses to get to and from the kibbutzim in the area. They waited until mid-day when they could be sure that military patrols and most men would be out of the area and then began shooting at cars traveling along the road. Before the *real* Israel Defense Force arrived, they murdered two women, two men and a fifteen-year-old girl who lived on another nearby kibbutz.

Gal is Shimon and Rikki's daughter. She is a lovely fifteen-year-old with a sweet smile and a wonderful command of English. If you ran into her on any street in the US, at first glance, she would be indistinguishable from any other smart, well-brought-up youngster over here. She gave up her bedroom for me to sleep in for the night – graciously insisting over my objections. She was just as welcoming and generous as her parents and all of the other Israelis I met over there. As I bent down to put my bags on the bed in her room, I glanced out the window and saw those two towers silhouetted against the darkening evening sky. Just a few hundred yards up the slope, the Hizbollah Tower seemed to be craning its neck past the Israeli tower to get a better look at me.

At one point during our dinner together, Rikki and Shimon got up to get (even more) food while Gal and I kept chatting. At one point she looked at me very seriously and said, "You were not afraid to come?" I smiled. Here was a young woman who woke up every morning literally under the guns of a group who, if not for the Israelis in the other tower, would gladly murder her just for the sake of the political statement. I suddenly felt like laughing. I truthfully hadn't given the dangers much of a thought until I had seen the tower through her bedroom window. Now she watched me as I framed my answer and I could see that she had a maturity and judgment impossible (and, thankfully, unnecessary) for most American teens.

"No," I said with a quiet conviction and confidence that surprised me a little. "I wasn't. Besides," I said, hoping that the bravado was understated enough, "statistically, the most dangerous time in this whole trip was the plane ride." Gal gave a solemn little nod of the head to this. I wondered why she didn't ask the obvious next question – "So why don't more come?" Tourism is down 85% in Israel compared to two years ago. This is a devastating blow to a country that is also suffering economically from the same recession that has affected the U.S. She didn't ask though. It seemed enough for her to know that I was there and that I didn't feel it was any big deal.

The memory of her beautiful, serious face stays with me as I fly home. As does the visit that I had had the night before that with my randomly selected family in Haifa. Yaacov and Miri Broder, like my friends Rikki and Shimon, are hard-working people who are devoted to their family first of all. They have four children who are obviously the center of their lives. The kids go to private school from the slightly cramped but beautifully kept apartment that Miri says a little defensively is "all we can afford because the school is so expensive." Only a total ignoramus could miss the richness of the life they give their kids and the warmth of their devotion to them. It came up that Yaacov is the son of, as he says, "a Schindler Jew." Once again, in a trip of constant wonders, the whole focus of the world seemed to shift. Here we were having dinner with a family which, but for the righteousness of an odd but courageous man a half a century in the past, would not have existed. Not just this solid friendly Yaacov but these vibrant, children. Without Schindler it is certain none of them would be here.

Yaacov had also spoken of the time that Schindler visited his classroom when he was a child in school. At the end of his visit, one of the other children asked him why he did what he did and risked his life to save those 1200 Jews. Yaacov tells with a matter-of-fact smile how Schindler did not hesitate, but said "This is not a good question. The real question is why so many others did not do anything to save anyone."

I understand now that I needed this trip and these revelations more than the Israelis needed me. Oh yes, it was a good thing for them to have me there; and the money I spent there will help the economy in some small way. The real change that was made, however, was in me. The miracle of this trip to Israel is that I went with the self-important view that I was doing something important for the Israelis first and getting a trip to Israel in the bargain. As it turned out I got far more out of it than Israel did. I got to take part in something important and beautiful. I got to see myself in a new way; and I also got just a fleeting glimpse into what it is like to live gracefully with courage and with memory.

So, this is what I want the new "oldest Jewish man or woman in Newton who has never been to Israel" and every other Jewish person in every other American community to know: **Now** is a good time to go to Israel and let our friends, families and our heroes see our faces. Now is the best and most important time to go there and let this beautiful generous country throw its arms around you with gratitude. It is more important now than it has ever been to go to Israel and be renewed by returning to your source. When your friends and family ask you, "why now?" ask them instead "why not you too?"

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freelance writer, with articles in a number of national publications to his credit.