

Rabbi David Lerner  
Temple Emunah  
Shabbat Parah  
March 14, 2009  
An Israel Attitude

Shabbat Shalom.

This sermon is given this morning in memory of Herb Weinstock, *zikhrono livrakhah*, may his memory be for a blessing, who passed away at the end of our shul's trip to Israel. Herb was a wonderful, quiet and humble man – a national expert in train crashes and someone who was devoted to his wife Jolley Anne and to his children. *Yehi Zikhro Barukh* – may his memory be blessed.

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.....”

I always like to say that being in Israel is not like being anywhere else in the world – there is an intensity to life there that is hard to describe. A day there is like a week somewhere else; a week there is like month elsewhere. The highs are higher, and sadly, the lows can be lower.

Our Temple Emunah Israel Trip over February vacation was in many respects like the country – filled with amazingly powerful times and challenging moments. This trip, like every one I have been on, changed me profoundly.

Even before we left, we were faced with some stress as some folks had to cancel for a variety of reasons. While some took out trip insurance, others did not and I wanted to try to help them recoup some of their costs.

I sent an email to many different people and e-lists about the possibility of joining our group just a couple of weeks before our departure. Thanks to the internet, I received a number of queries from around the country. A woman called me from a Conservative synagogue in Queens and said that her parents were interested in coming, but they were Orthodox. She wanted to know if the trip kept kosher and Shabbat. I told we did, but women and men would participate equally in our prayers. She said they were old-style Orthodox and would not have a problem with that. So, Michael and Millie Baran joined our group and were a gift – reading *haftarah* spontaneously the first Shabbat, bringing their souls and positive energy to our group and then sharing with us the story of how they survived the Holocaust.

While there is no doubt that it was challenging in places to have a large group with ages ranging from 11 months to 85 years old all together, there was also a special magic to this experience. The children learned from our older members and our kids brought a special joy and energy that was simply priceless. Whether we were dancing at

a dinner in Tzfat or hiking to Ein Gedi, having our children lead Lekha Dodi on a porch overlooking the Kotel, the spirit of our diverse group was quite special. Often, I would watch a grandmother at a site – she would be watching her grandchildren. I *shepped* a lot of *nachas* seeing it all.

I am big fan of *davening* (which really has no good analog in English to describe it – I guess prayer) in nature. And *davening* outdoors in Israel, that's the best. We started the first morning with a hike that began when it was still dark – the beauty of the morning in the desert as the first light dawned and then that night, we watched the sun set over the Ramon Crater as we welcomed our first Shabbat in Israel. I'll leave Masada and the Southern Kotel for another time, but let me mention that our own Alyssa Towers bumped into a Religious School classmate of hers whose daughter had her Bat Mitzvah right after we finished. Talk about a small country and a small people! Oh, and four days into the trip, I found out that one of our guides was my third cousin!

Another highlight was seeing friendly faces – everywhere we went we saw friends, family and Emunah folks: the Weyls in Haifa along with eight of our Pre-school teachers with Shelley Rossman, our pre-school director and our member Miriam Sidman, Rabbi Herb Rosenbloom, the first rabbi of Emunah with his wife Sheila and Rabbi Joel Meyers, the second rabbi of Emunah, all joined us for Shabbat dinner in Jerusalem. They shared stories of the first Emunah trip to Israel 40 years ago and many other memories.

But maybe the most surprising experience happened in Jerusalem on an archeology experience. The Waqf, Islamic organization that runs the Temple Mount decided to open a new entrance to the Muslim holy sites and in the process took out many dump trucks filled with dirt that contained a large amount of Jewish history. They dumped this in a valley as garbage. We went to sift through this and help save our people's history. We found pottery shards from every period, a kitchen tile remodeling project from two decades ago, mosaic pieces from the Second Temple, but a special cry of joy reverberated when a four-year-old boy, Nico Bers, from our Pre-school found a coin. The scholar who was with us said it was a Maccabean Coin, a real find. While Nico cannot take this home as a souvenir, his name it immortalized as the finder of this 2150 year old coin! It was just incredible!

There were challenges – getting a large group from place to place on time was not easy and a few viruses circulated among the group. So there were a few doctor and ER visits.

And yes, tragically and unbelievably losing Herb.

Through it all, we celebrated, laughed and cried together. The most important part of the experience was the deepened community we created. I have seen that continue on the last two Shabbatot in shul and at Purim. Our young people, some of whom barely knew each other before we left, sit with each other – the younger children sitting on the older teens' laps. Two adults at Kiddush pick up a conversation where they left off in Jerusalem. Last Friday morning, a woman came up to me in the parking lot

and said so sweetly, “Our family really misses seeing you each morning at breakfast.” There is simply a feeling and special intensity to sharing such wonderful and rich time together. I miss it too.

Fortunately, these strengthened relationships continue and will enrich not only the other members of our group, but expand the web of connection for our entire Emunah community and beyond.

Beyond community, I take away from this trip to Israel (and many others) having a positive attitude. There were some stressful times for me – like when three of the members of my family got the flu – and I cannot say that I always handled it as well as I may have wanted to. Israelis are used to living with some stress and some of them have developed strong coping mechanisms. They problem solve and manage crises, they do not dwell too much on what they cannot control and they fill their lives with celebration and joy.

Visiting an army base in the North, it was striking to see the soldiers who had just been to Gaza. While they and the entire country had just endured a three week war and a tumultuous election (which, unbelievably, is not quite over yet), they seem to take it all in stride – moving on with their lives with a “can-do” attitude.

When we visited the saddest moments of our people’s history at Yad VaShem, I was inspired by the stories of those who picked themselves up from hell, and moved forward with hope.

Viktor Frankl, a survivor, in his pithy, but vital book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, explains his approach to life. One key element is controlling and changing our attitude. Even if we can’t change a situation or circumstance, we can still choose our attitude toward a moment; this is often a self-transcending way of finding meaning, especially in difficult times or moments of unavoidable suffering.

In a very different, yet also parallel, way, here in Lexington, some of us confronted hatred yesterday as part of our Shabbat preparations. While we as Jews retold the story of Haman’s plan to wipe out the our people on Purim, a real live hate group, the Westboro Baptist Church of Kansas, came to Lexington High School yesterday. They are passionate haters of gays and lesbians and they do terrible things like picket at funeral of American soldiers, since they believe that their deaths are caused by American openness to gays. They came to Lexington to protest the inclusivity of this area.

Our response was a Shield of Loving-kindness – we simply stood there protecting our high school students from their hate by being silent and not engaging them. One of the training sessions for the over 400 of us who stood outside yesterday was hosted here on Tuesday evening and while the work of listening to hateful, vile speech was draining, it was rooted in controlling our own emotions and our attitude.

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I believe the prophets were trailblazers of this approach. While many of them encountered hate, loss and tragedy, they remained positive and hopeful. That is not to say they did not mourn, they did –they mourned the destruction of the Temple, Jerusalem and our people’s homeland 2600 years ago, but they moved on.

They moved forward – encouraging the people and giving them hope. Ezekiel’s message in the *haftarah* for this morning, *Shabbat Parah*, is emblematic of that. While Ezekiel sees the destruction around him, he does not give up. Where other civilizations would have ceased to exist, he realized that God, our Torah and its eternal teachings can continue and his words of hope like “I will sprinkle pure water on you and you shall be renewed,” lifted the people.

They could not change what had happened, but they could change their reactions to it and with that, change the future. It was his words of comfort and what followed that are the reason we are all sitting here today thousands of years later.

In fact, all we can control is our attitude and how we make sense of the world. While our 12 days in Israel were mostly filled with incredible moments – some loud and some soft, our trip concluded in a most devastating way. As we celebrated our experiences at our final banquet, we learned that Herb, who had taken ill, needed emergency surgery. As we boarded the plane, I learned that he was death’s threshold. Before we took off, I was able to speak with Jolley Anne reciting the Sh’ma and the other prayers one recites at death. It made our flight home most sad and surreal.

Denise Forbes, who was close with Herb, reminded me of a story that Herb had shared with many of us during the trip. This is what he told us and how I can best make sense of his loss.

Herb grew up in an Orthodox shul in the Bronx and had his Bar-Mitzvah in 1949. He was quite moved by the birth of the State of Israel a year before his big day and gave a speech in Hebrew, Yiddish and English supporting Zionism – it was a bit controversial in his Chabad synagogue where some were not so Zionist. But he did promise his rabbi that day that he would go to Israel and see Jerusalem.

As life unfolded, he never took that trip. Two years ago, he and Jolley Anne signed up to go on our previous trip but had to cancel due to illness. This year they came and Herb fulfilled his promise. He had a good week in Israel....

There is a special *zekhut*, a special merit to having made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and to having your soul depart there. When Herb was not feeling well, he went to Sha’arei Tzedek Hospital, an outstanding hospital in Jerusalem. The name of the hospital means – the gates of the righteousness.

I cannot help but feel some solace knowing that Herb’s last acts were the fulfillment of this life-long dream as his soul departed through the gates of the righteous.

May Herb's soul, which ascended to heaven in Jerusalem, only go higher and may his story inspire us to deepen our connection to Israel and our attitudes toward life.

Shabbat Shalom.