

## Israel Bulletin Article for April 2010

1993 was an exciting year to live in Israel. Jerusalem was filled with cafes that I could enjoy as neighborhoods were revitalized. There was boundless optimism as the world watched Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat shake hands on the White House lawn; we thought we were on the cusp of true peace. Sadly that was not to be.

I also felt that this potential for peace would lead to more openness on the religious front. I worked hard on public relations and fund-raising for the Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel. Along with a few friends, I led an egalitarian minyan which, at its peak, ran three times a day at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies. Our minyan would proudly proclaim that we were the most frequent egalitarian minyan in the State of Israel!

This excitement led us to want to form an egalitarian minyan at our people's holiest site: the Kotel. We picked a good time for our first service: Yom Kippur afternoon. We came together for Minḥah (the afternoon service), Ne'ilah (the closing service of Yom Kippur) and the concluding moments of this most sacred day. Since the Kotel Plaza was not crowded, we were able to daven (pray) almost without any disruption. We sat in a circle on the plaza -- then much larger than it is now -- though, technically, one is not supposed to pray there.

One older man came up to me and in his broken English asked: "So, this is how you do it? The boys and the girls ... they are together? ... OK."

I smiled. We were able to slip under the radar and enjoy this most sacred day in a way that reflected our religious values as the sunset on the Jerusalem stones colored the Old City a most magical golden hue. It was one of the most profound spiritual moments of my life.

Unfortunately, future experiences were not the same. Egalitarian minyanim at the Kotel grew more successful and were not able to slip by unnoticed. On Shavuot, the next spring, our group was attacked and I was hit in the head with a rock as I chanted the haftarah. The Ultra-Orthodox have so perverted our tradition that they engage in violence against Jews in order to impose their will on others.

Sadly, over the years this situation has only deteriorated. With the absence of peace and a political system broken in some respects, the Ultra-Orthodox's power has continued to grow. In recent years, they have succeeded in segregating some buses by gender and they work hard to prevent non-Orthodox Judaism from receiving almost any funding or recognition in Israel. In addition, they have made it harder to convert to Judaism in Israel, even retroactively nullifying Orthodox conversions.

The result of all this is to disempower non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel during a time when most Israelis are becoming increasingly alienated from Orthodox Judaism and many are searching for spirituality. It is also starting to alienate American Jews who are fed up with this; most sadly, converts to

Judaism are becoming disillusioned with the Jewish state that does not welcome them.

At the same time, Israel needs us more than ever as it faces an existential threat from Iran that overshadows its internal problems. In addition, many people around the globe have turned against Israel.

So, what are we to do? I believe we must try a two-pronged approach. We must continue to be involved and supportive of Israel; whether we are on the left, center or right, we should redouble our efforts to ensure Israel's survival as a Jewish state; that is why last month, I was proud to lead a delegation of eight from Temple Emunah to the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, DC. Please save the dates for next year: May 22- 24, 2011 and make sure to join us! Depending on where your political sensibilities reside, others may prefer getting involved with the New Israel Fund or the David Project.

We should look for ways to strengthen our community's Israel connection by learning Hebrew, watching Israeli films (see "Ajami" nominated for an Academy Award) and attending our next Synaplex Shabbat on Hol HaMoed Pesah with an Israel theme. My mother, Dr. Anne Lapidus Lerner, will be joining us and teaching on "Visions of Jerusalem" and Joel Berkowitz, the New England Regional Director of the American Technion Society, will speak on "Good News about Israel" discussing Israel's integrated army, its universities and the Russian immigration.

Speaking of which, I just read "Startup Nation" which I commend to you. It is the story of how Israel has become the innovation and entrepreneurial capital of the world. It is a wonderful analysis of Israel's hi-tech, bio-tech and other creative achievements.

Looking ahead, since Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel's Independence Day) falls during Patriots Week, we have moved our larger celebration to Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day) on Wednesday evening May 12. And we will hold a memorial program for those killed in Israel's wars and by terrorists on April \_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Please see page \_\_\_\_ for more information about t these two programs.

We can also visit Israel; if you are interested in our next Temple Emunah Israel Adventure, please email me. I hope to bring together a planning committee in the coming months to determine when our next trip should be and what it should look like.

The Psalmist writes: "Sha'alu shalom Yerushalayim – ask for the peace, the welfare of Jerusalem." What exactly does this mean? To me, it means worrying about her security, her wholeness with regard to her moral stance -- which includes voicing our opposition to haredim whose fundamentalism threatens us all. It means speaking out against attacks on our fellow Jews even as we deepen our relationship with Israel so that we can have access to her culture, language and people from the inside.

So while we will continue to support Israel, we must also raise our voices in opposition to women being arrested for holding a sefer Torah or wearing a tallit at the Kotel. Enough is enough. Please read Rabbi Jacobs's inspiring sermon

about this and write letters and emails to the Prime Minister and Ambassador Oren. Please visit our website: [www.templeemunah.org/Israel](http://www.templeemunah.org/Israel) for all this information. It will take only a few minutes to make a vital impact.

Finally, it is time to vote in the next World Zionist Elections which occur every four years. We hope to have all of you register to vote for the MERCAZ, the Masorti Movement's party which opposes the Orthodox monopoly on religion. See page \_\_\_\_ and our website for more information. I hope to see you as we support Israel in her time of need, her quest for peace and her need to change her religious policies.

May Israel continue to thrive, reaching peace with her neighbors and bringing religious equality to all the Jews in her midst.

Happy 62nd Birthday, Israel!