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Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara CA

Twenty of us traveled to Israel this summer, in late June, just before the war began. Planning the trip, I had set as my goal that we would meet the people of Israel. Of course, we would stand at the Western Wall and climb Masada, and float in the Dead Sea, but more importantly we would meet and speak with some of the flesh and blood human beings who live there. That was easier said than done.

I asked our host rabbi at the Leo Baeck Educational Center to arrange a meeting for us with a group of Arab and Jewish teenagers in Haifa, but when she asked them they told her: "No. We don't want to meet some American Jewish tourists so that they can stare at us like monkeys in a zoo!"

Israelis are nothing if not direct and utterly real, but sadly most organized tours tend to turn Israel into a Jewish Disneyland. It's easier, much easier, to drive folks from archeological site to museum, then to some awesome natural beauty and finally to go shopping for souvenirs, than to set up meetings with real people, who have personalities and opinions, and who may or may not show up, and you never know what they will say. And many tours skip right over the horrible messiness of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which can almost be avoided as long as you don't talk to any people. But I wanted to embrace the messiness.

In the end, our trip was one surprise after another. Almost nothing happened the way I had planned.

On our first morning in Tel Aviv, I was looking forward to visiting BINAH, the secular yeshiva, where for the very first time secular Israelis—not orthodox, but Jews like you and me!--are studying traditional Jewish texts. We were met by one of their staff, a young American who had recently moved to Israel. I was immediately disappointed, thinking: "I want them to meet Israelis, not Americans!" He pulled out a text from Talmud, about Rabbi Elazar and the very ugly man. Our young host divided the group into pairs and told them start studying. I thought: "No!! This is our first day in Israel. Don't ask them to study!" Then I saw that every pair had plunged directly into heated conversation over the text. "Wow" I thought, "How did that happen?"

We drove up the coast to Haifa and pulled into a community center where we were supposed to meet some teens from Leo Baeck. No one from Leo Baeck was in sight, but a very little girl...no more than five years old...came up to us and started demanding: "Who are you? Where are you from? Why have you come here?" I told her, and she asked "what is your name?" and then turned to every single person in our group "v'at? And you? v'atah? And you?" This four year old was our first native-born Israeli...and she drew us in and we were captivated. Nothing was happening the way I had planned.

We drove to Tsfat. We were walking through the old city and heading toward the ancient synagogues when we passed by three or four musicians, sitting by their instruments, eating lunch. I suddenly realized who they were and shouted to our group: "these people are Aggadeta! I have their music!! I listen to it all the time but have never met them before! Are you performing today? When and

where?” and they said: “we’ll play for you now!” Then we stopped and sat and they took us on a mystical musical journey. As we walked away, I commented to someone in our group: “That is authentic Judaism.” I hate to say it, but much of Tsfat is contrived and kitschy and imported from the US. But in that moment with Aggadeta, by pure luck....or divine intervention... we experienced something ancient and real.

After Tsfat, our itinerary called for us to “stand in solidarity with soldiers on the Lebanon border.” From previous trips I thought we would meet the soldiers for a photo op at some roadside shopping mall. Instead the bus took us up a long winding dirt road until we pulled right up to a dusty IDF outpost, looking directly over Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon. A dozen young soldiers were lounging around, armed to the teeth, and we stared at each other, and slowly started to make awkward conversation. We asked how old they were, and where they were from, and what their jobs were in the unit. All of them were 19 or 20 years old, looking just like our teens from CBB, except that they were carrying huge guns and their jobs were “driver, sharpshooter, machine gunner, commander.” The teens in our group were invited to climb inside the tank, and my head was spinning as the boundary went all fuzzy between Disneyland and reality. As we were getting back on the bus, the captain of the unit arrived and he looked furious. As we drove away our guide told me “he said we shouldn’t be up here; we’re a big target and things are very tense right now.” Apparently, we were far away from Disneyland.

I do not know about that particular unit, but it was kids just like those we met who drove two weeks later into Gaza, into the most terrifying and dangerous situation of their lives. Tonight I think of them and wonder: who lived and who died? Who by fire and by water?

We wanted to meet non-Jewish Israelis. We were taken to dinner in a Druze village, where our hostess was a nineteen year old girl who spoke to us about the Druze culture. I learned a great deal that evening. I had not known that the villages in Israel with the highest per capita number of officers in the Israeli army are Druze. I had no idea that 60% of Israel’s Druze are secular and 40% are religious, and that it is common for secular and religious Druze to marry each other. Or that if a young Druze man or woman marries a non-Druze they are utterly cut off from their community and can never return. And I learned that an articulate and personable nineteen year old makes a superb community representative. We should learn from their example.

Our bus driver, as it turns out, was a Bedouin. Saher. After a few days, I asked Saher if he would be willing to speak to our group about his own life and culture. He stopped, turned and looked me straight in the eye, and said “if we are going to talk, then first I need to make you coffee.” He brought out a big Bunsen burner from under the bus, and boiled up a pot of Bedouin coffee and passed out little paper cups of coffee to everyone in our group. And then he began to tell us about his family, and his life. He did not speak of the discrimination against the Bedouin and the confiscation of their lands. I don’t know how Saher decided what to say and what to leave out.

We also visited a Bedouin women’s weaving collective where women are weaving with traditional methods and materials, and selling their stunning work to

raise money to send their daughters to university. The head of the collective, stood erect and spoke to us with dignity and passion about the project, and how it is transforming the status of women in their society, and then she knelt down on the floor and demonstrated the immense physical effort it takes to hand weave a Bedouin carpet. Later that evening we pulled up to a so-called Bedouin camp to meet with a so-called sheik and partake in a so-called Bedouin meal. It was fake, fake, fake and I noted with dismay the contrast with the proud and inspiring woman crouching by her loom in the afternoon.

Issam, the one Palestinian with whom we met, was also not on the original itinerary. Our guide Amos—a Lieut. Colonel in the army reserves and a peace activist—asked me if we would like him to arrange for us to meet with his friend Issam, a Palestinian peace activist, and we said “yes of course.” We met in our hotel in Jerusalem, and from the start of our meeting, Issam’s eyes were watering....from tear gas. Traveling by car, the eight-mile journey from Ramallah to Jerusalem had taken him three hours, because of massive demonstrations taking place in the West Bank in protest against the Israeli army’s sweep through thousands of houses in search of the three teenagers who had been kidnapped. Issam came through checkpoints, teargas and demonstrations specifically to meet with us. His family has suffered and has been targeted by Hamas. They are shunned by neighbors and his daughter may not find a man willing to marry her, all because of his work and friendship with Israelis. After our trip, his brother was shot by Hamas because of Issam’s work with Israeli peace activists. In awe, we sat in the presence of this man of uncommon courage.

The kidnapped teenagers were an unseen presence throughout our trip. Banners on buses read “Gilad, Eyal and Naftali we are with you.” Their photos were on the news all day long, every day. The entire country had become a single vast family, whose sons had been kidnapped.

In Israel everything is absolutely personal.

On our last Friday night, we celebrated Shabbat in a garden in Jerusalem, with the musical group and religious community Nava Tehila. Sitting in a circle of about forty people, led by two guitars, we welcomed Shabbat. The rabbi, Ruth Gan Kagan, introduced a verse from psalm 99 by mentioning the three kidnapped boys, and she expressed the hope...which was fading but not yet entirely gone...that they would be returned home safely. And then we sang *Korim el Adonai, v’hu ya’anem*. They cry to the Eternal, and He will answer them. Just that verse over and over, forty people singing, crying out to God, hoping for an answer, praying for those boys. Over and over, quieter and quieter....and then silence. It was an extraordinary moment of real prayer.

The next day was our last, Shabbat in Jerusalem, and we gathered for a final conversation and a program. We went around the group and everyone shared their favorite experiences from the trip. Something marvelous and unexpected happened in that conversation. It became completely clear that the five teens in the group had become fully adult members of the group. Their comments in that session were so profound, so thoughtful and interesting, that we knew that as a group we had crossed an important threshold. We had in fact welcomed our teens fully into the adult community.

Finally, a woman arrived, ...a surprise planned by the tour company. She looked to be an ultra-orthodox woman, and greeted us and began to tell us about her life and her community, and to make snide comments about Reform Jews and secular Israelis. Our group became more and more uncomfortable and finally one of us exploded and demanded to know how could she criticize the Israeli soldiers who were risking their lives to defend her and her community. At that point, she took off her wig and announced that she was an actress and that the whole thing was educational theatre. Fake! It was a terrible note to end on...a false note at the end of ten days that had been distinguished by real conversation and real encounter. Not with fantasy or with Disneyland, but with the very real, terribly imperfect, but vibrant and living human experience of Israel.

A pilgrimage to Israel changes a person. Every time I go, it changes me, and this time as well. For one thing, I learned...one more time...that truly life-changing experiences are never planned. They come upon us, if we can remain open and receptive.

Secondly, I learned a few new truths about our collective religious life. After returning to Santa Barbara, I have attended the community meetings to hear from people what they find most meaningful at CBB. There have been many wonderful and important comments, but four themes have registered with me, all of which feel connected and resonate with our trip to Israel.

Here's what I have heard from all of you. First, many of the most significant moments happen in small groups, a group of twenty, for example, traveling together for ten days. Second, we are often most deeply touched when we share a religious experience with someone from a different generation.... The teens in our Israel group, for example, speaking to us, and teaching us, and taking their place among us as full adults. Third, people like the way at CBB we make things personal. People come here for the relationships. Not so different from the way everyone in Israel feels like family, in joy and in tragedy. As we continue to grow larger, we need to keep everything personal. And finally, people at CBB like their Judaism real. Not fake and not pretentious. Real conversation. Real emotion. Real prayer. Especially now.

When it comes to the High Holy Days, the New Year, and the horn blows and the community gathers, we don't want fake. This is too important to make believe. Here at CBB, we like our Judaism real.

May you and your family and all of us be written in the book of Life for a Happy, Healthy, Peaceful New Year. L'shanah tova tikatevu.