

Three weeks ago today, I was floating in the Dead Sea. It was the final day of our PJC Israel trip. The desert sun was relentlessly baking the beach. The water was as warm as any hot tub. But unlike a hot tub, you don't sink when you sit down in the Dead Sea. The high salt content of the water pushes everything up to the surface. So even a bulky guy like me has no choice but to float. And float I did; an easy back float that felt like relaxing in a recliner. Unlike in any other body of water, floating in the Dead Sea is completely effortless. There is no need to kick or stroke to maintain position. But coming out of your float does present a real challenge. Thrust your legs down to stand and you can end up with a face full of burning salt water. The buoyancy of the Dead Sea will tip you right over. To get out of my float, I had to roll myself over using one arm for stability. Illyse said it felt like being a turtle trying to turn right side up off its shell.

The Dead Sea is not like any other body of water. To enjoy floating in the Dead Sea, you have to leave all your previous experiences of swimming behind and adopt a totally new perspective. You have to do the opposite of everything they taught in swimming lessons. And as much as our guides tried to instruct us beforehand on the proper techniques and safety rules, it was impossible to fully appreciate the lessons until we were actually in the water.

In the same way, Israel is not like any other country. To truly understand and appreciate Israel, we have to leave all you have ever read or heard about the country behind. Actually being in Israel gives us a very different perspective on our homeland than one we get from the media. It is truly impossible to understand what is going on in Israel or what Israel is all about unless you have been there. And to help keep things in perspective, there is nothing better than going back again. To me, this reminder was the most important takeaway from our congregational trip.

Here's another story from our Israel trip that illustrates this point only too well. On the Friday we were in Israel, we drove up to the Golan Heights. We first stopped at

an abandoned Syrian bunker; a reminder of the time, before 1967, when the Syrians used their positions on the Heights to rain bullets down on the Israeli kibbutz below. We then stopped at another kibbutz to visit their chocolate factory and winery. We were scheduled to visit the Hula Valley nature reserve right after that. But, as usual, we were running a little behind. So we skipped the nature reserve and headed for a second Golan Heights overlook, where we could see quite clearly across the Syrian and Lebanese borders. We could hear a very faint echo of exploding shells on the Syrian side. But otherwise, the view from our vantage point was incredibly calm and serene.

That afternoon, we left the Golan Heights and began our long bus ride to Jerusalem for Shabbat. These days, the tour buses all come with wi-fi, so some of us used the time to catch up with email, Facebook and news. A few minutes into our bus ride, one of the members of tour group called me over. "Did you see this?" she asked me, pointing to her phone, "Missiles from Syria land in Northern Israel." I quickly checked the Times of Israel website. Two missiles had indeed been launched. And where did they fall? The Hula Valley! Only twenty miles away from where we had spent the morning. And right in the area where we would have been had we stopped at the Hula Valley Nature Reserve, as we had planned.

Now if anyone here in the United States had been closely following our itinerary and monitoring the news from Israel, we probably would have been bombarded with frantic phone calls and emails. "Holy cow, missiles are landing right where you guys are touring? Are you all right? Did you have to evacuate or go into a bomb shelter?"

But it wasn't like that for us at all. We did not see any missiles. We did not hear any explosions. And, even when we found out what had happened, we were reassured that the only reason Israel even let the missiles land, instead of intercepting them with the Iron Dome, was because they weren't headed anywhere near where anyone was. The missiles fell harmlessly. We never felt that we were in danger. We drank wine, we

ate chocolate. In fact, that Friday was one of the calmest, most relaxing on our trip.

Our PJC Israel trip was an emotional experience for all of us. We felt the thrill of being in the Jewish State, the Holy Land. We swelled up with pride as we visited the room where David Ben Gurion delivered Israel's declaration of Independence. We were overcome with awe and reverence as we joined hands and approached the Kotel, the Western Wall together. We held back tears as we moved through the exhibition rooms at Yad VaShem. Our hearts raced with excitement as we relived the story of a group of brave young people who fought for Israel's Independence at the Palmach Museum. And those are only some of the highlights.

There was, however, one emotion that we never experienced: fear. We never felt that we were in danger during the trip; not when we traveled through the West Bank or the Arab section of East Jerusalem, not on the borders of Lebanon, Syria or Jordan, not while rafting in the Jordan river among a very mixed group of Jews and Arabs, not when we saw Israeli fighter jets scrambling overhead. The closest we came to genuinely scary experiences were our expedition through the dark, slippery Roman water tunnels in Caesaria and our camel ride across the desert to Abraham's tent. (Actually, riding the camels wasn't so scary, it was getting on and off them).

Media coverage of Israel tends to focus on terrorist attacks, settlement building, stalled peace talks, political infighting and the threats from Islamic extremists and a potentially nuclear Iran. Israel seems constantly embattled; eternally threatened by hostile forces from all sides, reviled by many in the community of nations. I know people who have never traveled to Israel because it looks so dangerous on TV. I know families that have begged their college juniors to go anywhere else for their year abroad; lest they have to constantly worry about their child's safety. I don't blame them. If all I knew about Israel was what I saw on TV, I would be afraid to send my child too.

Of course, the threats to Israel, from Palestinian terrorists, from Hezbollah, from ISIS and from Iran are all very real. We were confronted with the reality of these threats the very second we entered the security line at El Al. We were reminded of them when we drove by Israel's security fence, when we saw just how close Israel is to hostile neighbors, and when we saw battalions of young soldiers assembled for Jewish heritage training at the Western Wall and at Yad VaShem.

But, at least for me, spending time in Israel served as a powerful reminder that Israel is not just about the security situation. Israel is so much more. Israelis live prosperous, productive lives. They shop at fancy suburban malls and take their kids rafting and to the beach. They make art, and graffiti. They work in high tech and high finance. They drive buses and operate cranes. Israel is a thriving, democratic, Jewish country. It is, for us and for all Jews, the cradle of our civilization; a place where we can walk in the footsteps of Abraham, David, Jonah and Elijah; of the Maccabees, the Zealots and the mystical rabbis of Tzfat. Israel is a place where the Hebrew language lives; where Jewish culture and creativity flourish. Israel is a daily expression of our Jewish values in action; a place to which every Jew has the right to return. In short, Israel is our homeland and our home; not just a cause to be championed but a birthright we should embrace with all our hearts.

So what does it mean to be a Zionist? To me, it means being someone who is passionate about Israel; who indeed wholeheartedly embraces Israel as a birthright and a homeland; who loves Israel with heart and soul. Being a Zionist is always wanting the best for Israel. However, being a Zionist has nothing to do with a person's views on Israel's security situation. If it did, Shimon Peres and Menachem Begin would not both be among the most revered leaders in Israel's history.

For the last few months, the American Jewish community has been tearing itself

apart over Israel's security situation. Specifically, we have been engaged in a high profile battle among ourselves over the implications of the Iran nuclear deal for Israel. It is understandable that emotions have run high over the Iran deal. There's a lot at stake. A nuclear Iran poses a huge threat to Israel; even greater than the threat Iran already poses through its sponsorship of anti-Israel proxies and worldwide terror. The question is: will Israel be safer with the deal or without it? There are people in the Jewish community, people passionately committed to Israel, who have argued both sides of the issue.

The same is true in our congregation. As many of you know, I have come out in favor of ratifying the deal. I have written extensively about my views and shared them with the congregation. In short, I believe that in spite of all the shortcomings of the deal, and all the areas the deal doesn't cover, it is better for Israel, and for our country, to have to face the problems created by ratifying the deal than to face the problems created by not ratifying it. Our President, Shea Lerner, has taken the opposite view, and has also written to you on this issue. I applaud Shea's initiative. We have tried to model a civil, respectful discourse. And I am proud to say that we have succeeded. We both recognize the importance of being informed and engaged on this issue. We both recognize the critical role the American Jewish community plays in advocating for Israel. As strongly as we may feel about our own particular views, we believe that the most important outcome of this controversy should be the coming together of a committed group of people who can help lead our congregation toward greater engagement with and support for Israel.

To that end, Ed and Eileen Fleischman have agreed to head up a new Israel Committee for Plainview Jewish Center. I want to thank Ed and Eileen for their leadership, and Shea for recruiting them. The formation of this committee is long overdue for our congregation. I hope that some of you will be moved to join the

committee, and all of you will participate in the programs and activities it will sponsor. This is Zionsim in action, an initiative that will bring us together in love and support of Israel.

The discourse on a national level has not always been so civil. Both opponents and proponents of the Iran deal have spent millions of dollars on advertising and devoted countless hours to lobbying members of Congress. The arguments within the Jewish community have become intense and, too often, personal. Opponents of the Iran deal are accused of being more loyal to Israel than to the United States, of being warmongers, and even agents of a foreign power. Supporters of the Iran deal have been repeatedly accused of paving the way for another Holocaust and of betraying the State of Israel. The rhetoric has become so heated and so personal that Representatives Nita Lowey, Elliot Engel and our own Steve Israel, all Jews and opponents of the deal, had to issue the following statement:

We remain concerned that individuals on both sides of the debate have resorted to ad hominem attacks and threats against those who don't share their opinions. This is unacceptable. It is especially egregious to attribute malicious intent to decision makers who are thoughtfully debating the details and effects of the agreement.

Congressional debate over the Iran deal is probably over. Only time will tell if the deal will lead to a safer Israel and a more constructive Iran. But we already know that the Jewish community has sustained a significant loss. Because of the irresponsible rhetoric of some, we allowed our fundamental unity to fracture. We have made enemies out of our friends. We have alienated the very people with whom we share a common passion for Israel, simply because we disagree with them on this one,

admittedly important, issue. What will happen now that the Iran deal appears to be done? How long will it take for us to pick up the pieces of our broken coalition. How long before the hard feelings heal and the resentment fades away? How will we as a community now advocate effectively for aid that will help Israel deal with the potential threat from a newly enriched Iran? How willing will we be to come together to support Israel during the next crisis?

On another level, I worry about how all this infighting looks to those on the outside, especially to those growing number of Jews who are not so passionate about Israel. Is this the kind of Zionism we want to model? Is this the kind of Zionism we expect our kids to embrace? The security situation in Israel is very important. And as American Jews, we play a vital role in ensuring our country's support for Israel's security. But sometimes we give off the impression that that's all there is to being a Zionist; that supporting Israel is about who can most stridently defend Israel against her critics, about who can sound the alarm the loudest when she is embattled. Maybe that model worked when Israel was an emerging nation, or when it was being attacked from all sides in 1967 and 1973. But times have changed. Israel is a strong and prosperous nation. It is a nuclear power with the most powerful military in the Middle East, by far. The need to defend Israel may not seem so obvious to younger Jews any more. And the moral questions raised by Israel's status as a regional superpower are more complicated than they were when Israel was fighting for its life.

If we really want to broaden support for Israel in the Jewish community, if we really want to transmit our Zionism to the next generation, we need to start thinking more holistically. certainly need more defenders of Israel. But we need people who are passionate about Israel even more. We certainly need more students on college campuses who can repeat pro-Israel talking points. But we need students who wholeheartedly embrace Israel as a birthright and a homeland; who love Israel with

heart and soul even more. We certainly need young adults who will turn out at pro-Israel rallies. But we need young adults who sincerely want the best for Israel even more.

How do we foster this love for Israel? By helping more people to forge a relationship with Israel, by transforming Israel from a cause into a passion. Relationships can only form when the parties spend time together. The single most important thing we can do to spark our own passion for Israel is to go there; to see the land, to meet the people, to relive the history. The single most important thing we can do to spark passion for Israel in our young adults is to send them there. And we can give Birthright a tremendous amount of credit for doing just that. Birthright is the biggest reason we have to believe in the future of Zionism. And the most important thing we can do to keep the flame of our passion for Israel burning is to go back again and again.

Again, the best thing we can do for Israel is to go there and keep going back. I have spent my entire adult life advocating for Israel, giving speeches, writing letters and editorials, teaching classes. But I am convinced that nothing I have done for Israel has had as much impact as taking 23 members of our PJC family there this summer on a ten day tour. The passion for Israel, kindled and re-kindled through our tour, was evident in everyone's eyes, and in the remarks people made to me and to each other throughout the trip. This kind of passion is what Israel, and what our Jewish community, needs more of. It is not necessary for all of us to express this passion in the same way when we return. Some of us may choose to channel that passion into traditional Israel advocacy. But others may choose to channel their passion somewhere else. Some might devote themselves to learning Hebrew. Others might take up the cause of religious pluralism in Israel. Still others might direct their newfound energy to supporting efforts to protect Israel's environment, or to promote Israeli culture and art. There are so many

possibilities. The important thing, for each of us, is to channel that passion into something meaningful to us, and to keep fanning the flames.

In conjunction with our new Israel committee, I intend to continue my efforts to help us find new and meaningful ways to engage with Israel. It is my hope that, in addition to the very important work of Israel advocacy, we will also create a broader community of all those who care deeply about Israel, and that those who become part of this community will share their interests and experiences with each other and the congregation. I hope that we can create more opportunities to experience Israel together in a variety of ways that transcend the narrow realm of politics and current events. And I also hope that, after more than thirty years of waiting, and an agonizing one year delay, the success of our trip to Israel this year will be contagious. I hope that more of us will be inspired by our experiences to travel to Israel soon—and that it won't be too long before we have the chance to share this experience as a congregation once again.