

David Ogul

I keep telling Rabbi Rosenthal that it is *not* a good idea to afford me the microphone in a shul packed with congregants; he might not get it back.

But... He asked me to detail the impacts that my recent 4-week trip to Israel and 3-week stay at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem had on my faith, and I learned long ago *never* to say 'no' to a rabbi.

The short answer is that I left Israel a far more observant Jew. Not that I was an occasional visitor to the synagogue in the past. In fact, those who know me know that even before I left for Israel, I had been going to Minyan daily and Shabbat services every Saturday. Those who know me know that even before I left for Israel, I wore my kippa and talit katan at work. Those who know me know that even before I left for Israel, I said the Shema every morning and every night. Still, I returned far more committed to my faith.

I now say brachot, blessings, before every meal – something I didn't do before. I now say birkhat hamazon, grace after eating, after eating every meal – something I didn't always do before. I now say minchat, the afternoon prayer service, at home every day and ma'ariv, the evening service, at home every night, in addition to saccharit at shul every morning. And, as Rabbi and others will attest, my turns as shaliach tzibur, the leader of the daily Minyan service, have become a little more, well, spiritual.

But two episodes during my trip, two episodes that happened outside the yeshiva, impacted me more than any other, and I feel they are important to share with you.

The first occurred when a friend, a former Israeli soldier who is now a student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, convinced me to spend a Shabbat weekend with him in Tzvat.

Anyone who has been there will tell you that Tzvat is more than just an artists' colony; it is a spiritual city, the center of Kabbalah, a place where one senses G-d's presence as soon as you arrive.

It didn't take long for me to come in contact with G-d like no other time in my previous 51 years.

Shortly after we arrived by bus from Jerusalem, my friend, Jesse, suggested we go to a Mikvah near the old city. I had never been in a Mikvah before, and shortly I after emerged from the frigid waters fed by a stream inside an out-of-the way cavern, I was changed. While waiting for my friend, I walked to a foot bridge overlooking a cemetery housing the graves of Kabbalah's founders. Suddenly, I was stopped by the wind. I closed my eyes and let it carry me away. This was nothing less than the Holy One rushing through my soul, wrapping me in His embrace, guiding me toward a life as a better Jew. Adonai, the Kadosh Barachu, was speaking to me, letting me know that my imperfect past wasn't as important as how I would carry myself from this day forward. This was an experience, that if I were to describe it in detail, would leave many of you thinking that I had lost my mind. In fact, I had finally found it.

Although this life-transforming event lasted but a few minutes, I felt like I had spent an eternity with G-d. I had never felt so at peace

before. The episode eliminated any doubts I may have had in the past about G-d's existence, about G-d's spirit being part of virtually everything on this Earth. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but cry I did.

The second episode occurred during my final Shabbat in Jerusalem at the home of a rabbi after morning services at Congregation Shir Hadasha in the German Colony. Esther Israel, who taught one of my courses at the Yeshiva, had invited several guests to her home, and one was a writer originally from New Jersey but who was now living in Jerusalem. Somewhere between the servings of salad and salmon, I commented that I found it much easier to be a Jew in Jerusalem than in the States. In Jerusalem, everything shuts down on Shabbat. In Jerusalem, there were 50 shuls within walking distance of my apartment in Nachlaot – there is no need to drive to any of them. In Jerusalem, Jews are a majority; the observant don't feel out of place wearing a kippa and talit katan. And in Jerusalem, praying the required three times a day is routine.

My new friend from New Jersey was unconvinced. Her message: Too many Jews in America are lazy. It is embarrassing to her, she said, that too few of us in America take the time to learn Hebrew. Studying Torah and not knowing Hebrew, she said, was like kissing a bride while she's wearing a veil. Too many American Jews, she said, are not committed enough to Jewry. Too many American Jews, she said, are half asleep while Jewry in the States withers away.

Too many American Jews, she said, are idle bystanders living in a country while their religious values are being compromised. All, she said, because we have opted to live in a place where we can earn more money at the expense of our spiritual identities.

At first, I was angry at what I considered not only an outrageous stereotype, but a pompous attitude and complete lack of decorum. And, in fact, she did later apologize for making me, and her hosts, feel uncomfortable. But as I reflect back on what she said, that woman had some salient points.

As we reflect upon our lives during these High Holidays, as we look at where we've been and where we want to be, we have to ask ourselves: Are we losing our sense of identity? Are we letting our faith become secondary to our jobs, or hobbies, our love of the legal tender?

Some 70 years ago, 6 million Jews were led to their slaughter by animals intent on eliminating our people. Today, with so many of us failing to live as Jews, with so many of us failing to adhere to even the simplest rituals, with so many of us turning away from our religion, are we setting the stage to put our very existence in doubt?

One of my favorite lines comes from the 1994 Disney classic *The Lion King*, a movie that has just been restored and re-released in the theaters in 3D. It comes when the spirit of Mufasa tries to convince his prodigal son, Simba, to return to his roots:

"You have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are," Mufasa says in a speech that, interestingly enough, could have come straight from the *Book of Kings*.

“Remember who you are.”

My trip served many purposes. It increased my appreciation for the state of Israel. It made me want to use my skills to work on behalf of the nation. It exposed me to Marsipan – the greatest bakery on Earth. And it helped me appreciate the fact that Israelis are suffering through many of the same issues we in America are facing: An assault on the middle class. Rising prices. Accumulation of wealth in the hands of a powerful few. A government that everybody seems to love to hate.

But most important, my trip to Israel and my time at the Conservative Yeshiva helped renew my commitment to Judaism. And so, I return with a message from G-d.

You have forgotten me.... Remember who you are.

La Shana Tova.