



June 1, 2018

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

In April I was privileged to lead a joint trip to Israel together with Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin of ICCJ, and Rabbi David Wise of the Hollis Hills Bayside Jewish Center. Our heterogeneous group included members from the three shuls and some friends and relatives of members. For most of the participants, this was their first trip to Israel.

While this is not the first, and hopefully not the last trip we lead together, it was unique in the fact that it coincided with Israel's 70th birthday. The participants from the three shuls – 34 in all – were moved to tears commemorating Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day. Yom Hazikaron is different in its character and mood than the American Memorial Day. For 24 hours (from sunset to sunset) all places of public entertainment (theaters, cinemas, nightclubs, pubs, etc.) are closed. The most noticeable feature of the day is the sound of a siren that is heard throughout the country twice, during which the entire nation observes a two-minute "standstill" of all traffic and daily activities. The evening siren found us at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, together with thousands of Israelis, and in the morning we heard the siren together with preschoolers from Congregation Netzach Israel in Ashkelon. The tears of memory became tears of joy the following evening as we celebrated Israel's Independence Day – Yom Ha'atzmaut – with thousands of Israelis and tourists in the streets of Jerusalem. Groups from all over the world congregated in Israel for this exceptional occasion and our shul and community were represented there as well.

Our joint trip was a big success. Nobody got hurt, no luggage was lost, and everybody talked to everybody else at the end of the trip. Three shuls and three rabbis got to work together, one more time, for the benefit of our community, and ties between the three shuls were strengthened.

The biggest accomplishment of the trip, however, was that the participants were able to experience and to fall in love with the "real" Israel, not the ideal one. From Yair, our wonderful guide, we heard a disheartened view on Middle East politics; from Rabbi Gustavo Surazski we heard of the many challenges non-orthodox congregations endure in Israel; and in the Golan Heights we experienced how precarious the feeling of security could be, only a few miles away from Syrian fire. And yet, the complex reality brought all of us even closer to Israel.

Our Sages taught (Avot 5:19): "Any love which is dependent on something, when the 'something' ceases, the love ceases. Any love which is not dependent on anything will never cease."

While the above teaching applies to the love between husband and wife, parents and children, siblings and friends, we can also apply it to our relationship to Israel.

If our love for Israel is dependent upon an ideal picture of Israel, then sooner or later we will be disenchanted and our love will cease. If we can fall in love with the "real thing," then our love will endure forever.

Let me close this message with a reflection and an invitation. The only way to fall in love with the "real" Israel, is being there, seeing it with your own eyes, experiencing the magic, the beauty, and the complexity. If you have been to Israel before, try to visit again. There is always something new to see and this is being said by someone who lived there for four years and visited countless times. If you haven't been to Israel before, it is not too late. In our group were participants in their late 80s and early 90s, all of them fulfilling a long overdue dream.

I am sure we will have new opportunities in the future to travel as a congregation, but you don't have to wait. Groups are leaving from the States every month and if you wish, I can always help you put a trip together. Just tell "your people" to be in touch with "my people."

L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim! Next year in Jerusalem!

Many blessings to all of you!

Rabbi Manes Kogan