

This d'var torah is dedicated to Larry Starer, may his memory be for a blessing.

Led by Larry, 55 members and friends of Ohev Shalom returned from a group trip to Israel last month. A few other families returned from their individual trips. All of us were dazzled by the *land*. Thrilled by the burgeoning nature of this 60-year old country. Enchanted by the thriving *Jewish community* within.

Amy and I have long been dazzled and deeply moved by Israel. By the developments of its everyday. And by the more dramatic saga reviving the 2000-year old dream of returning to Zion. We're finally ready to make the move to be fully part of it. It was a decision decades in the making by us individually, and jointly as a couple with kids. We're excited.

I'm also thrilled for this community in the aftermath of the Israel trip, and I know Larry too. What lessons do we bring home that can impact the life of community? And how do we apply these lessons?

I want to share three lessons from our trip, along with the images that embody them, and then to discuss their application to our synagogue's life.

Judaism must be alive in the physical presentation of our synagogue and its public spaces.

Let me take you to a Tunisian synagogue in the northern Israeli city of Acco. For a moment, just imagine your favorite Biblical story. Your favorite Biblical character. *Or*

favorite Jewish symbol. *Or* favorite Jewish holiday. Now see it displayed in resplendent mosaic art. *On* our sanctuary wall. *On* our lobby floor. *On* our chapel ceiling. *Or on* the entrance of our building. Alongside the mosaics conjured up by your neighbors here today.

It's the most astounding living synagogue I have ever seen. All the product of one man's vision, an immigrant from the Tunisian Island of Jerba. Those who pray in that synagogue, as a broad Sephardi community does, are literally surrounded by the living stories, images and dreams of Jewish life.

So can we create a physical environment in our synagogue that radiates Jewish living in its every nook and cranny? It will require a shift in the way we look at our terrific facility.

As in our shul, everything in the Acco synagogue is dedicated in honor or memory of some individual/s. But, there, what they're dedicating – the depiction of Jewish life – takes precedence over the inscriptions and plaques. Here, that is not always the case. Our most prominent spaces need to be brought alive for the living and for those who, please God, will animate our halls in the future. I believe our deceased would agree with this.

It's time, for example, to bring the beautiful multi-colored tapestry created by our synagogue's children out of its marginalized location in the library into a prominent location. It's time to create a montage of photos of our professional staff and lay leadership, smiling at all who enter our synagogue. It's time to put up signs, both in Hebrew and English, directing visitors around the facility. It's time for our daily and weekly events to be displayed in displayed on easels near the entrance to our building.

The first impression that we make on people is critical. Moreover, how we present ourselves makes a statement on how we view ourselves. Today, we're decked out, buffed up. Smiling representatives of the membership committee greet us. [Easels tell us where to go and what to do.] Our president David Pollack and I are here to tell you about the good stuff going on in the shul. But what do we say about ourselves, and what message do we convey to others, when someone comes into the facility on an average day, and can't find their way to a living, breathing body in our office?

We have beautiful public spaces here. We must just make them more alive, reflective of our vital values, and inviting to one and all who walk in our doors.

We need to make Jewish living more normative in our community.

Shabbat is approaching, our second day in Israel. Dressed in casual Israeli style, we light candles at the edge of a public square in the Old City's Jewish quarter. Not in a synagogue. Not in a hotel auditorium. Not in a private area. But outdoors on the steps of an old 19th century hospital built by Moses Montefiore. We sing aloud Yedid Nefesh and L'cha Dodi without having to look to our right or left, behind or in front of us, at those who would gawk awkwardly at us. An amazing moment! There's no shame, no fear, or no anxiety about demonstrating our Jewishness.

It's normative to be Jewish in Israel. That's liberating. There no pressure to compartmentalize our Jewish identities as we do in the United States. To stuff our kippot in pocket or purse

after services. To leave much of our Judaism at the synagogue door. [TAKE A KIPPA AN PUT IN POCKET]

Being in Israel is like being at Camp Ramah full time. But the challenge to us is to be Jewish full time here in Wallingford, Swarthmore, Media and beyond – to relax the rigid the rigid compartmentalization of our Jewish lives and to just enjoy being Jewish.

We're on our way in this regard. Thanks to the initiative of Romie Griesmer, Elsa Wachs, and Naomi Wicentowski, a slight liberalization of our Kashrut policy, and the groundwork laid by Amy Pollack and her Synaplex Committee, Shabbat Echad has become a venue of Jewish relaxation and ease. My kids count down the days to it!

People of all ages and observance levels gather for a flavorful evening of potluck dinner, socializing, and prayer. During the prayer service, the kids play noisily and joyfully in the back of the auditorium. This used to bother some of the worshipers, but not anymore. The noise is now as much a part of the normative Jewish landscape of the evening as is prayer. We need more things like Shabbat Echad -- user-friendly, participatory, fun. More things like the Taste of Shabbat, where people live Shabbat beyond morning services, gathering for lunch, song and discussion. *Normative Jewish life.*

I pray that the newly established Jewish Life and Learning Committee can be a spearhead in this regard. It's a terrific group, comprising representatives from the ritual and adult education committees, liaisons from our key programmatic groups – Men's Club, Sisterhood, Social Action -- and veterans of Synaplex.

We need to get younger.

Back to Israel. One amazing day in Israel's North, we traversed the Golan Heights on jeep, rafted down the Jordan River, Israeli-danced while cruising the Sea of Galilee, and then dined festively in Tiberias. My family walked back to the hotel on the lakeside boardwalk, which was mobbed. Young people, young couples. Pregnant Jewish women. Men holding onto the 8 hands of 4 kids. Yeshiva students waiting in line for a midnight cruise on the lake. Festival-goers enjoying arts, crafts, and other *chachkes*. Little children – including my own -- delighting in the cheap toys available at the festival. Seeing this mass of mostly young Jewish life, I could not but be incredibly optimistic about the Jewish future, and feel energized in my own Jewish present.

Now, back Stateside. The demographics in our liberal Jewish movements are of great worry. We are significantly aging communities, with low birthrates and a high percentage of young people marrying out of the faith. How can we feel vital when we don't see enough of our future, literally, walking through our doors?

We need to get younger. How? Through our hard work as parents and grandparents. Teaching our kids to love their Jewish identities. Modeling joyful Jewish living year-round. Reordering our kids' extra-curricular schedules, along with the priorities of our own lifestyles. Neither religious school nor Camp Ramah nor a trip to Israel nor a successful bar or bat mitzvah can substitute for our labor. Our kids will not choose Jewish – walking in those doors frequently, walking out of them proudly, kippah *on* their heads -- if we ourselves don't convincingly choose Jewish. Our future, our youth, our feeling of youthful vitality and vigor as a Jewish community, they rest squarely in our hands.

Our Israeli travelers experienced the possibilities. A youthful Jewish society, enveloped in its narrative, living Jewishly all the time, in full public view. Something we also want here – in our synagogue, in our homes, in the open. The numbers may argue otherwise, but I believe it's possible. If each one of *you* steps up to the plate... Are *you* in the lineup?