

## **There's No Place Like Home**

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She faced a talking scarecrow, flying monkeys, a green meltable witch, and a courage-challenged lion. But when Dorothy Gale looked up at her Auntie Em and reflected on all that happened in her adventures in Oz, she simply said, "There's no place like home."<sup>1</sup>

"Home" is one of the most comforting words and concepts we have. As John Howard Payne wrote almost 200 years ago, "Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, Be it ever so humble there's no place like home." At the end of a long day at work or school, returning from a business trip or even a vacation the Talmud teaches us, "It is a joy to live in one's own house."<sup>2</sup>

As a Jewish community, we have historically been a people in pursuit of a home. The very first thing God tells Abraham is to leave his home for a "land that I will show you."<sup>3</sup> Each subsequent generation was forced to wander. And when we found temporary refuge in Egypt, we were enslaved, making Egypt where we lived, but never our home.

In Europe throughout the middle ages and into modern times, Jews were denied citizenship, equality, and the opportunity to truly create a home on that continent. It is no wonder that early American Jews finding a greater level of acceptance and welcome in the United States declared that this country was our long sought home, our salvation.

"My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west,"<sup>4</sup> wrote Judah HaLevi 900 years ago. Even as Jews found acceptance around the world, they longed for their spiritual homeland on a small spit of land off the Mediterranean Sea. The land promised to Abraham, conquered by Joshua, and glorified by King David. Jews built flourishing nations on her sand and have had that land ravaged and her people exiled many times. But at every point in Jewish history, we have looked to Israel, the land of milk and honey, as our hope to "be a free nation in our own homeland, the land of Zion and Jerusalem," as Naphtali Herz Imber authored in his 19<sup>th</sup> century poem, "Hatikvah."

This summer that Jewish homeland was under attack. Over 4000 missiles were launched into civilian areas of Israel from Gaza. Terror tunnels leading into residential neighborhoods were discovered. Daily life in Israel became responding to sirens and impending threat. Israel's retaliations were perceived as appropriate by many Jews of varying political backgrounds. While

in the general domain, Israel was portrayed as a terror state. Not a comfortable place at all, and yet still home. Temple member Shoshanna Malett reflected on her trip to Israel this summer, “This is the first time I lived in Israel as Israelis live. We ran from rockets and watched Iron Dome explosions over our heads; we left our apartment to stay with family in quiet areas only to run...when the sirens sounded. ...And yet...leaving Israel at the end of the summer was heart wrenching. There was nowhere else I would have rather been and I hated leaving. It is home.”

The discomfort was made worse by much of the media’s biased and misleading reporting. When I watched Mainstream American news, it always seemed to lead with reports on Palestinian casualties or Israel airstrikes without a broader context. For example, the news always focused on Israeli attacks, but never mentioned the latest breaking of a cease fire by Gaza. I had to stop watching news coverage because I was so angry at the way it was being presented.

Adding to the trauma of what was happening in Israel was the world’s response. An antisemitism that most American Jews likely thought long past or at least dormant raised its horrific head throughout Europe. Graffiti filled Jewish neighborhoods in Italy with slogans such as “Jews your end is near.” Firebombs were thrown at a synagogue in Germany. A Swedish Jew was beaten with iron pipes. Protests and death threats on the streets of Paris led thousands of Jews to leave France for their safety. The hashtag #HitlerWasRight trended on social media in Europe. This is not anti-Israel political protest, but hateful and violent threats against the Jews as a people that we sadly have seen before in our history.<sup>5</sup> While the United States hasn’t experienced a similar rise in antisemitism, protests, especially on college campuses, continue to bash both Israel and Jews as killers and hatemongers. The BDS or Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement has renewed strength including a victory for limited divestment by the Presbyterian Church. Independent US Senate candidate in Kentucky and longtime Neo-Nazi Robert Ransdell has been running on a campaign with the slogan, “With Jews We Lose.”<sup>6</sup> It is a frightening time and we think back to other times Jews yearned for the security of home.

Israel came into existence in the shadow the Holocaust. A safe haven for the displaced Jewish refugees, survivors of the camps and the Nazis was needed. Palestine became Israel on May 14, 1948. Immediately, the nation of Israel welcomed Jews from across the world and in 1950 passed “The Law of Return” ensuring the right of any Jew to immigrate to the Jewish

homeland and a safe haven. Jews would now always be able find a home giving life to Robert Frost's words, "Home is the place that where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."<sup>7</sup> For European Jews today, once again eyes have turned to sanctuary in Israel. But the Israel they seek is a home under attack and vilified throughout the world. We need to stand up for our Jewish home. In light of the criticism and hostility, now, more than ever, we should be proud American Jews who support the existence and security of Israel. We need to support her with our words, our opinions, our money, and our feet. I may not always agree with everything her government does, but I am proud supporter of the State of Israel.

When our family is in trouble; when things are at a low, we go home. This is the time to go to Israel. It is when they need us most that we need to go visit family. And with the world denigrating Israel, our Jewish homeland needs us now.

Israel is a place to which we return, even if we've never been there. It's an extraordinary thing to visit Israel. It's hard to put this feeling into words. So many first-time visitors to Israel have said that they felt like they were coming home as soon as they stepped off the plane. Temple High School student Amanda Porretto visited Israel for the first time this summer on a NFTY trip. Despite being there at the height of the Gaza situation, she fell in love. She shared at services earlier this summer, "Coming back to America was hard for me to do because I've never loved a place so much and leaving somewhere you love is a difficult task...Landing at JFK after an almost 12 hour flight was exhausting. All I wanted to do was hop on a plane back to Israel. I felt so connected with the people, the history, and Judaism. Being in Israel felt like a different world. I was happy and experiencing life in a different perspective."

One has to experience Israel to understand it. When I was in college, I was an active Reform Jew, but somewhat ambivalent about my feelings on Israel. I went there my junior year and everything changed in a moment. I understood my Judaism in a much deeper way. There are many ways to experience Israel including the incredible Birthright trips that all 18-26 year olds should not miss out on. But traveling with a more diverse group of ages can open up new insights. Going with people you already know and with people you see afterwards extends the experience. And going with a fabulous trip leader can make all the difference.

In this new year, I invite you to join an adventure to the Holy Land where I'll be the fabulous trip leader. This February, during President's Day week, RTFH will take an amazing

10-day journey that is appropriate for multiple ages and backgrounds. There are a lot of questions before devoting the time, money, and energy to an Israel trip. You can find out the details on the Temple web site about a creative trip that will appeal to novice and veteran alike. Or better yet, join me this Sunday at 2pm here at Temple for an information session with all the details on the trip. On your way out of services, take a flier with more particulars on the trip, the information session, and some useful links to excellent web sites on Israel. It's time for everyone to visit their Jewish home. Come with me next February and make it a reality.

Whether your first trip or many more, going to Israel is going home. ToFHY President Hannah Ball went to Israel this summer. She remembered, "The first thing we did when we arrived in Jerusalem was spend time at the Western Wall. It was my third time visiting the Western Wall and it felt like I was returning home."

NFTY or teen trip, Birthright, Temple Trip, or your own tour, now more than ever, we need to be there for Israel and head home.

Just because we are celebrating our Jewish home doesn't mean we can't try and make it a better place. Home is one setting where hopefully we can be honest with others. Israel may be the Jewish homeland, but Ultra-Orthodox Jews, since the founding of the country, have controlled all religious and personal legal areas including marriage, conversions, funerals, and public religious spaces. This has led to difficult and outright horrific situations for many Israelis.

Because there is only religious marriage, a Jew can only marry another Jew in Israel. And must do so under Ultra-Orthodox guidelines. This prevents interfaith couples. It also challenges Jews whose background is suspect, sometimes even by rumor, or an immigrant who couldn't bring documentation while leaving, for example, Russia. They are denied the ability to marry in Israel. This has forced 17% of Israelis to get married abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Israeli soldiers who have been killed defending the country are refused burials in Jewish cemeteries when their mother isn't Jewish enough for a government rabbi. Conversions by non-Orthodox rabbis are challenged and nullified even decades after the conversion. One wonders how Ultra-Orthodox Jews would treat King David given his great grandmother was the convert Ruth

But the news isn't all bad. Progressive and secular Jews are winning numerous court cases and public support. For example, a major legal ruling requires the government to pay some

non-Orthodox rabbis, including Reform Rabbi Miri Gold of Kibbutz Gezer, just as Orthodox rabbis are paid by the government. While women cannot pray with tallit, tefillin, and Torah at the Western Wall without massive harassment and potential arrest, a separate, but equal prayer space is being developed. It's not the ultimate goal, but it's a start.

We need to keep the pressure up and demand equal rights for Progressive Jews, secular Jews, Russian Jews, Ethiopian Jews, immigrants, gays and lesbians, interfaith families, non-Jews – in other words, about 90% of the people in Israel.<sup>9</sup> And we can do something in this coming year. Beginning in January, the World Zionist Congress has their elections. In the previous two votes, a broad coalition including ARZA of the Reform Movement and MERCAZ of the Conservative Moment, have worked together to gain the largest share of seats. They have been able to dramatically impact policy and monetary allocations to guide Israel to a more pluralistic and equal society. In January, we need every Jew aged 18 or older to vote for the ARZA slate in the elections. Election pledge cards are on your seats. Please return them to the table that will be in the lobby for the rest of the High Holy Days, to the Temple office, or mail them in. Yes, apparently postcards still exist. Or just visit [ReformJews4Israel.org](http://ReformJews4Israel.org).

By sharing your vote, voicing your support, or visiting in person, we value our Jewish home and stand up for who we are. In a world full of pain and hatred, we can work to create a better Jewish state, and a haven for those subjected to bigotry around the world. 'Cause as we all know, there's no place like home.

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<sup>1</sup> From the 1939 MGM Movie. In the L. Frank Baum book, Dorothy says, "I'm so glad to be at home again!"

<sup>2</sup> *Jerusalem Talmud Moed Katan* 2.4.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 14:1.

<sup>4</sup> Judah HaLevi, "My Heart Is in the East," (1141).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/02/world/europe/anger-in-europe-over-the-israeli-gaza-conflict-reverberates-as-anti-semitism.html?> and [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/world/europe/europes-anti-semitism-comes-out-of-shadows.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=HpSumMediumMediaFloated&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/world/europe/europes-anti-semitism-comes-out-of-shadows.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=HpSumMediumMediaFloated&module=second-column-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wlwt.com/news/local-news/WLWT-News/us-senate-candidate-uses-campaign-to-spread-slogan-with-jews-we-lose/28096066>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Frost, "Death of the Hired Man," (1915).

<sup>8</sup> <http://hiddush.org/article-6653-0->

[Hiddush\\_analysis\\_shows\\_Israelis\\_are\\_increasingly\\_marrying\\_abroad\\_to\\_avoid\\_Chief\\_Rabbinate\\_monopoly.aspx](http://hiddush.org/article-6653-0-Hiddush_analysis_shows_Israelis_are_increasingly_marrying_abroad_to_avoid_Chief_Rabbinate_monopoly.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_Israel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Israel)