

There's no place like home...

Many Jews who have either visited or lived in Israel have had that 'epiphany moment', a moment when they come face to face with the miraculous nature of Jewish history. At these moments one transcends the present moment and embraces generations past and future. These experiences are not necessarily 'kotel (Western Wall) moments'. Very often the realization is far more subtle. They realize that to return to the land of Israel, to merely stroll down a street named Malkhei Yisrael (Kings of Israel), to gorge oneself at a local falafel dive called melech shwarma v'flafel ("Falafel King"), and to root for the Tel Aviv Maccabee basketball team while enjoying a beer of the same name, is something that is singular in the long history of our people.

For me, this epiphany moment occurred on an Egged bus; Egged is the national busline in Israel. I was going to Tiberias for Shabbat and took the bumpy ride from Jerusalem to Tiberias via the Jordan Valley, a road less traveled now due to the matzav, the security situation. The road sharply descends towards the Dead Sea and then traverses slowly north through the semi-arid Jordan and Beit Shean Valleys, finally arriving at the shores of the peaceful Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). The road passes Israeli towns, Bedouin camps, Palestinian towns, and Israeli agricultural settlements and kibbutzim. The flora and fauna change throughout- from desert scrub to lush oasis's in the desert, from towering jagged cliffs to rolling green hills. I spent that afternoon with my eyes peering through the window, moved by the beauty of this very special land. However, it was not only the physical landscape which left an impression upon me, but the human landscape as well. I had just paid Israeli shekalim with pictures of David Ben Gurion on them, and was listening to the latest Israeli pop star. The Israeli bus driver was stereotypical- mishkagfei distanz (sun glasses), short pants and sandals, an open shirt, and was listening to Mizrachi music, a fusion of Judeo-Arab music and disco. The bus contained a myriad of people from all over the world and all walks of life, bantering along in Hebrew, a language which was all but defunct as a spoken language two hundred years ago.

This uneventful bus ride was remarkable in the very fact that it was mundane. The fact was that all of those people on the bus were not even self-conscious that this is the first time in two thousand years where Jews speak Hebrew, pay with Jewish money, ride a bus named Egged through Israel, and listen to the latest in Hebrew pop music. As an outside student from the United States this was powerful- the discovery of a place where being Jewish does not happen in synagogue or school or on holidays. Being Jewish occurs on the bus. For my Israeli brethren, it was simply another day. They were not self-conscious, because that is the way people act when they are at home.

For the Jewish people to feel 'at home' is a remarkable feeling. It is something that previous generations could only imagine. When Jews said next year in Jerusalem, Jerusalem was a figment of the religious imagination, embodying all the hopes of a people without place. Its existence resided in the heart of each Jew. In the words of the 11th century poet Yehuda Ha-Levi, "I am in the West, but my heart is in the East." For Halevi, and countless Jews like him, body and soul yearned to come together. In the act of coming home, body and soul have reunited, and we are able to be whole once again.

This fact is extremely important for us to remember, as our nation faces some very difficult transitions. Whether it is the security situation, internal corruption, or the loss of innocence, Israelis are faced with the question, "Is this what we wanted when we came here?" It is precisely at these moments that we need to remind ourselves how significant home really is.

Imagine moving into a new home. We arrive full of excitement, hope and expectation. For each of us, the house represents not only a new place, but a new future. In time however, there are cracks in the walls, things need repairing, and earlier problems resurface and sometimes are exacerbated. There are moments when we might wax nostalgic about a 'simpler time'. In reality however, there was never that 'simpler time'. In moments of reflection, one may have an 'epiphany', realizing just how good home really is, in spite of all the challenges.

While these little moments of insight may not embody HaTikvah, the 'great hope' which "the Jewish soul yearns" in the words of Naftali Herz Imber, these fleeting moments can remind us of the great blessing we are able to experience even when those great hopes seem to be tested daily.

L'shanah habbah beyerushalayim- next year in Jerusalem... and if we want to we can. Isn't that a blessing?