

Vy He Erev, Vy He Boker, Our Last Day

Rosh Hashanah 2nd Day

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Today's Torah portion, as always, can be interpreted on many different levels. It's a lesson in spiritual direction- holy listening to God's voice through angelic messengers, *Malachim Adonai*. And a challenge to not just listen but also to hear, and to respond, *hi nei ni* – I am here. I am present – to do Your will – to be of service – to be a holy vessel.

Of course, there are tensions, there are questions and conflicts. There is the hidden, and there is the revealed. Bringing offerings, as acts of courage, acts of faith, acts of healing.

And, there is the key issue of... as realtors say.... Location, location, location. Going to new territories to follow the inner vision, and follow the outer call. Going up, ascending, making *aliyah* to offer and pray at a sacred site. A holy rock on top of a high, special mountain – the closest place there connecting heaven and earth.

This sacred spot, where our prayers, and those of all Jews around the world, are directed towards. This sacred spot lies in the center of the holy city of Jerusalem, in the old city, above the kotel, at the northern center of the plaza known by many names, by the many peoples who revere this sacred site – The Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock, Har Ha Bayit, Haram e-Sharif, the Noble Sanctuary.

It is here at the center of this sacred area, where once stood the holy of holies, here is the Rock – the Foundation Stone, Even haShetiyyah as she is called, the center of our universe, the center of creation.

Today, I'm offering a contemporary story of these lessons and challenges. In the Jewish style of *maggid* – storyteller and spiritual guide – I invite you to join me on this journey of Reb Yitz's and my last day in Israel this past spring. Here our personal story becomes our larger collective *midrash*. And it also encompasses the haftarah description of Ezekiel's vision of the return from exile as well. So let us begin.

Vy he erev, vy he boker, and there was evening, and there was morning, our last day.

Our two month trip to Israel was coming to a close. Saturated with experiences, we were steering our last few hours, or so we thought. Much to do, packing and cleaning and goodbyes to be said. Hugs to be held.

But as often happens there, when you are listening deeply, or casually strolling through your life, a greater presence re-shapes your day's agenda, and you find yourself succumbing to a mystical pull towards the awesome holiness, the awesome beauty, the awesome challenges of this convergent center of the universe.

"Yerushalayim, if I forget thee, may my right arm loose her strength," says the prayer from Psalms. We had planned our trip to encompass several holy days, from Purim and Pesach, through Yom haShoah, Yom Ha Zicharon and Yom Ha Atzmaut, (Holocaust Remembrance Day, Memorial Day and Israel Independence Day).

Our departure was to be a sendoff after Independence Day, the 63rd birthday of the state. But we were unaware of the shifting calendar – because of the potential danger of someone preparing on Shabbat, the Orthodox rabbinate had arranged to scoot the observances one day later. So now our departure no longer neatly coincided with the conclusion, but rather the centerfold juxtaposition of these two intense congruent observances of Memorial Day and Independence Day, which fall back to back.

And so the intense feelings of completion and departure were overlaid with the complex convergence of this slice in time.

Though straining to see it then, we would find that this day, this one very full day, became a total synthesis of all that had come before, and all that would come later, a metaphor for our entire trip.

Vy he erev, vy he boker, and there was evening, and there was morning, our last day.

The early May late afternoon sky in Jerusalem was speaking to us – time is passing – what to see and do? How to spend our last moments? When would we ever come again?

Sunday afternoon at four, we strongly wanted to complete our peace-makers tour agenda, visiting a collaborative Jewish-Palestinian theater rehearsal being co-directed by our friend Dr. Bonna Haberman and her Arab colleague Mahmoud. Author, scholar, co-founder of Women of the Wall, Bonna is cutting edge with her passionate peace explorations and we admire her work.

Winding through Jerusalem, we made our way to the magnificent arched front entry to the YMCA, a spiritual center devoted to peace, run primarily by Arab Palestinian Christians. Standing regally just opposite the historic King David Hotel, it houses a sports center, a pre-school, some cafes and an auditorium.

Here we found a dozen Jewish and Arab actors engaged in a dramatic, tense enactment of the passionate need for collaboration around the issues of sharing water. Water, that life-giving force that is essential to all of us. Water, the precious substance in short supply in the Middle

East, where politics and centuries of wandering have given its value a place of utmost importance.

Historic wells, wellsprings of our matriarchs, of our peoples – survival itself depends on access to water. Only weeks before, with our TBI group and again on our own, we had seen the drying up Dead Sea, diminishing in size, shrinking back from the edge as the shoreline recedes. And the Kinneret, the Sea of Galilee, the heart of the water source, that lies between Jordan and Tiberias, that source now provides all the water for the country.

How to protect, preserve and share this precious resource?

The actors were in a struggle onstage. Grabbing, reaching, panting, in desperate moves. A pregnant Arab woman enacts collapsing onstage – others climb over her as they are all scrambling for that one plastic water bottle, symbol for all the water that remains.

Ein Hod. Ein Henya. Ein Kerem. Ein Gedi. Beersheva. Historic waterspots. Centers of oasis in the desert. How can we share the little water and this tiny piece of land?

After an hour observing the rehearsal, we returned to the car to find a parking ticket – bummer! Only two minutes late, but one more item to take care of before our departure. Returning back to the German Colony neighborhood, we were soaking in sites for nearly the last time.

Our right turn around the corner of Liberty Bell Park flooded our memories with a beautiful scene a few weeks back, when hundreds of Arab families were playing and picnicking here on Shabbat afternoon, only a few blocks from our apartment, as Jewish families were strolling home from shul for Shabbat lunch. And, across the street from the park, the grim reminder of other days, where a black wreath hangs from the iron fence post adjoining the memorial plaque listing 16 people killed at that spot in a bus bombing in 2002.

Painful and hopeful realities intermingled. The magenta bougainvillea is blooming and spring scents fill the air.

We continue down Emek Refayim Street, past the golden stone buildings and upscale cafes, and jockey for a parking spot in the rear alley behind our place. As we get out of the car, we spot an unfortunate site – a flat tire! Oh no, within ten minutes we have both a parking ticket and a flat tire on our last day here. The everyday tasks and events are taking on deeper meaning, slowing us down. What is the message here we wonder? We're getting bonded with this place, living almost as residents. And we don't have time for this! Or do we?

The flat tire slows us down to a stop. The sun is setting, and businesses are closing too, in observance of Memorial Day. The clatter and cacophony of street noise is quieting. We enter our wrought iron arched doorway, pull out the suitcases to pack, and turn on the TV. The country is preparing to honor their dead.

Only somber music, no movies or entertainment, and a continual flowing of national stations with poignant photojournalistic stories of soldiers lost in previous wars, and local people killed in terrorist incidences.

Just across the street, the red and black sign of Cafe Hillel is turned off as they close their doors. There, only ten years ago, a terrorist bomb killed several people sipping their cups of coffee one morning. Our friends' daughter's 2nd grade teacher was one of them. Now, ten years later, the 2nd grader is 18 and Racheli is in the army, positioned on the border with Egypt. She couldn't come home this year for Passover, and cried from her lonely outpost as we sat with her family for seder. It's a sacrifice each family makes, one by one.

This spring's massive Arab uprisings have given new fuel to the very tentative feelings of prospects for peace between Israel and her neighbors. Israelis are feeling nervous, uncertain what the future may bring. Millions of angry neighbors uprooting their long-term national structures, yearning for empowerment and a voice, is a fantastic beginning of a transformation in the region. But there is no certain outcome, and the steps towards a full evolution of the revolution will take years to play out.

Israelis feel vulnerable, alone and quiet. The border with Egypt is now no longer a confident secure border with a peaceful neighbor. Thirteen million Egyptians in turmoil are only 250 miles away. And other countries surrounding the region are in tumult. The feeling of instability is a strong undercurrent in each household.

Racheli, our 18 year old friend, and Nadav, our 19 year old cousin, are protecting us. Yes, they must be capable to make big decisions if need be. Racheli's older sister Livia, just completed her 3 years of army service as an intelligence officer. Brilliant, beautiful and sensitive, we've known her since she was a baby in Seattle. Now a young woman turning the next chapter page of her life applying for higher education, she calls us on the phone and asks, "Would you like to join me tomorrow morning at Har Hertzl – the national cemetery – where the country's nationally televised memorial service will take place? I'm going to say kaddish at the graves of some soldiers who have no one to say kaddish for them. Would you like to come?" she asks.

We weigh our options, and wonder, is she a messenger? But we still have the flat tire to fix and not enough time for it all. Our packing and cleaning continues and we tumble into bed, not knowing what the next morning will bring.

Vy he erev, vy he boker, and there was evening and there was morning, our last day.

Next morning, we'd forgotten about the siren. At 11:00 am sharp, a piercing siren blares out across the whole country, and for 2-3 minutes, everything stops. We stepped outside our door and saw the sidewalk full of people at standstill. Cars stopped. The crying blare of the siren was the only movement of sound. The memorial call for the dead. Everyone in the whole country has a family member or friend who has died, as soldiers or in terrorist attacks.

The intensity of the loud blast seems to go on forever, past your comfortable tolerance point to a dissonant edge. As the siren subsides, slowly people and traffic start moving again, and the Har Hertzl ceremony begins on TV live broadcast so everyone can share. Israeli flags are flying everywhere, and I wonder how this day feels if you're not Jewish.

With a spare tire on, we drive down past the YMCA again and drop by Avis. "Take the car to Hassan's on Bethlehem road for a new tire," they say. "Okay, we're in a hurry, let's move along!" We're being guided through the mundane experiences of residents, knowing where the car repair joints are located. Each stop, a spiritual opportunity.

We pull into the crowded parking lot at Hassan's. The car wash is spritzing water everywhere, wasting it going down the drain. I remember the theater performance and wonder about water conservation sensitivities and perceptions.

All the workers here are young Arab men. We wait on a rickety wooden bench as the tire is patched and we are sent on our way. They are a little cranky, but we can't communicate very well. The Avis sticker gets you taken care of here. We look like Jewish tourists and are stared at with a bit of an edge. It's another opportunity for spiritual bridge building, but we falter with the language barrier, and move on.

Now back to our list. Our last few hours of errands and packing. We are in the final stretch. Or so we think.

From the apartment we have brought a precious scrap of paper found during our clean up. Our beloved colleague from Phoenix, Reb Sarah Leah, healing from sudden colon cancer surgery, has asked us to *daven* (pray) for her at the Kotel, the Western Wall.

We last saw Sarah Leah here a month earlier after she completed sitting shiva for her mother Feiga, whose body she had flown to Israel to bury alongside her dad, who passed away a few years ago.

Observant, orthodox Jews from Toronto, they epitomized the old immigrant families, highly valuing Jewish education and religious observance in a humble way. One of 5 children, Sarah Leah cared for her ailing mother in the last 9 months of her life, bringing joy and laughter, healing and spirituality, and even the chance for her 90 year old mother to hold a Torah for the first time in her life. Her parents' life-long connection with Judaism and Israel made it an obvious decision to be buried in the holy land. Such grave spots are available at the cemetery at Beit Shemesh, a short distance from the Tel Aviv airport.

Sarah Leah passionately fulfilled the mitzvah of "honoring your parents," and we wanted to honor her deep request for us to *daven* for her healing at one of the "hot spots" in Israel before our departure. The Kotel was such a place.

Reb Yitz and I agreed that we would “run over to the Kotel,” daven, put her *kvittel* – prayer on the scrap of paper – into a crack at the holy wall, and then come back to finish packing and cleaning and errands. Little did we know how silly – what a joke, that would seem like in retrospect.

We were listening all right, but on a superficial level. But pushing through our agenda and timeline. A holy request was upon us. Yeah, we could allocate a few minutes to run it by. A rush job at best. But were we really putting our deepest selves into this request? Were we listening, really paying attention to what was presented? In our busyness, the opportunity to infuse ourselves with spiritual awareness in this task of everyday holiness was slipping by.

We drove the winding way to the Old City, not far from our apartment. Around the corner from the old railway station, down the hill, past the mosaic Zion Hotel and the Menachem Begin center, then right up the lane past the Valley of Siddon. Approaching Har Zion, Mt. Zion, we dramatically learned a shocking lesson – we were going the wrong way on a short one-way stretch, suddenly encountering a huge tour bus head on! Hmm. I guess we weren’t fully paying attention.

The unusual, patient Israeli bus driver kindly let us do a U-turn and get out of the way, and we scooted up to a small parking lot adjoining Mt. Zion. The bus driver reminded me of Tzvika, our TBI tour bus driver, who only weeks ago drove our group of 32 around the country, exploring art, and ancient architecture, peace-making and the people who are engaged in its passionate work.

Our red and white chariot, merkavah bus, had brought us here, and to the big cities and the small villages, weaving through historic and modern pathways, exploring the multicultural textures that make up the varied landscape of peoplehood.

Across the rocky terrain, we wove through the highways of Israel, visiting with religious leaders, artists, activists, inspirational teachers and so much more.

The Yemenite community of Kiriath Ekron, home to Yedida Bessemer, welcomed us with open arms as our large bus navigated the narrow passageways of their community to bring us to their shul, their pita ovens, their warm front porch dinner awaiting us amidst a flowering garden.

Strangers became instant friends, as we dined on chicken soup and pita together, singing songs and gathered for a shared photo shoot. Twenty-five Israeli Yemenites and 33 Eugeneans. A Jewish family portrait crossing borders, joining hearts.

Back at the Mt. Zion parking lot Yitz and I were fumbling with the ticket machine. It was becoming a hot day and we were in a hurry and it was jammed. We couldn’t afford to get another overtime parking ticket. Someone finally told us, it’s a holiday – parking is free!

We strolled down the winding sidewalk behind the *yeshivot* of the Jewish quarter to the back entrance to the Dung Gate. The rooftops of the Sylwan Arab neighborhood were drenched in midday sunlight and the colorful laundry was billowing in the breeze. Across the way was the steep hillside of the Mount of Olives, dotted with white gravestones as far as the eye could see. We still hadn't searched for the grave of Yitz's great-uncle who is buried there, Yankel Hankin, who came from the Ukraine in the early 1900s. It will have to wait again for another trip.

Why hadn't we brought the camera today? Oh yeah, we were just going to do a rush job to the Kotel and back. Nothing extraordinary to feel or see. Just the regular amazing scenery juxtaposed with the other regular amazing history and scenery.

Somehow human nature kind of gets used to awe after a while, and it all melts into your new vision of everyday reality. But really, it's awesome! The spiritual Mussar teaching of 13 attributes to holiness includes *Yirah*, experiencing Awe on a daily basis. This is an essential path to understanding God's presence in our lives. Our hearts were being awakened as we proceeded towards the spiritual core.

Vy he erev, vy he boker, and there was evening and there was morning, our last day.

We approached the stone gateway like fish swimming upstream. The current of people was flowing out as we clambered over the hot stone pathway, past the Davidson Center and the Ophel Archeological Gardens. I looked down below to the ruins of the Temple, where only weeks before our TBI group had gathered for their first visit to Jerusalem. The site brought back memories of our davenning there at the egalitarian site, of 11 year old Avi Shugar wrapping himself in his new *tallit*, and of the shocking news we received while standing in this holy site. That day, a bomb had exploded at the central bus station. We felt the shared impact of tension and fear. We prayed for peace, holding hands in a circle, while standing only a few feet below the Al Aqsa mosque, on the former steps to the Temple.

There our hearts quivered with the unanticipated news that shattered our beings and put a new reference point on the immediacy of terrorism "hitting home." There also, on the steps to Hulda's gate, our extended family had gathered years before to celebrate our daughter Talya's Bat Mitzvah, with 80 friends and family- Israeli and Russian relatives – half of them new immigrants in only 1993.

"Come on, let's get going." Yitz's voice brought me back on track. Through the Kotel security gate, like an airport scan, a few questions, and a wave through. The soldiers were casual yet attentive. Yitz's shekel coins in his pockets activated the alarm beeper. He emptied his pockets and whizzed through again.

And then the open Kotel plaza greeted us- with room to wander, and occasional holy beggars sprinkled around the corners of the site. The large metal *hanukiah* perched above the tunnel entrance, the signs for food for the hungry, the Yeshivah entrances, the memorial flags, the

ambulances in waiting, the children and the elders, the collection of humanity gathering to offer their prayers.

Reb Sarah Leah, a master of giving *brachot*/blessings, would surely greet the holy beggars, and offer *tzedakah*, had she been here. A master of giving *brachot* and acts of holy *chutzpah*, Reb Sarah Leah is radiant with her willingness to encounter the other, to lift up each soul in joy.

A *hasid* of Reb Shlomo Carlebach z'l and Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, her spiritual mastery lies in the realms of Chassidic energy and Torah wisdom embodied.

Approaching the Kotel in her honor, we definitely needed to do that mitzvah – greet and offer *tzedakah* to the special beggars at the Kotel. As we are taught, the whole world depends on the righteous works of the 36 holy hidden *tzadikim*, the Lamed Vavniks. Maybe one was here today.

Then it was time for the task we had been anticipating – davenning at the Kotel for her healing and placing the small folded *kvittel* message into the cracks of the Western Wall stones.

But were we really spiritually awake and paying attention? Were we attuned enough for this special task? Or were we just racing through a “rush job” at the Kotel en route to some other more ostensible errands and tasks? Could we even hear if God was talking to us? Now that we were finally AT the center, could we slow down enough to just BE in prayerful awareness and open our hearts to receive? We were being directed, but were we really listening, to hear angelic voices, to be present enough to respond, Hineini, I am here? Were we ready to make an authentic sacrifice? To bring an offering of our hearts?

How should we approach our task in an authentic and respectful way? We wondered. Our personal values are challenged by the *mechitzah*, the separation between men’s and women’s sides, and the women not having equal religious rights here yet. Women of the Wall have monthly gatherings here, yet the formal power of the Orthodox rabbinate limits the free expression of worship. We wanted to jointly and equally offer prayers and deposit the *kvittel* together. We slowed down a little, took a breath.

I had an idea. “I know- let’s go down slowly, each on either side of the *mechitzah* (the separation barrier between the men’s and women’s sides.). When we get all the way to the front, let’s squeeze up against the fence towards each other, lean together, and quietly sing songs and prayers and together discreetly push the *kvittel* into a crack that we can both reach.”

“OK, it’s a plan. Turn off your cell phone. Turn on your personal sensitivity GPS,” Yitz agreed.

Slowly we approached the holy Wall, on each side. People were praying and swaying. A boy’s Bar Mitzvah ceremony was just ending up front on the men’s side, and as they stepped away with their Torah, more room opened up front.

We delicately and slowly zigzagged our ways closer to the Wall, eyes meeting at the front, separated by the porous fence *mechitzah*.

That sense of closeness, yet separation, reminded me of Shoah/Holocaust moments – of shared journeys, shared risks, separation yet closeness. I don't know why. It's just one more of those soul imprints.

Quietly we each began davenning, then very softly singing together, healing prayers. Women's voices are not permitted to be heard. We were strong, yet soft, focused and committed. Lifting our friend's heart and healing at this holy "hot spot" as she called it.

Waves of Reb Shlomo and Reb Aryeh came through. Reb Dovid Zeller. The singers of healing songs who have passed over to their heavenly home. A chorus of angels brought our prayers to the gates of the Holy One, we hoped.

Nervously I crunched the *kvittel* even smaller in my hand. I tried to stick it in, but it was too large. The names, the holy names, Sarah Leah, her deceased mother, her husband, her son..... may their prayers be heard on high!"

We found a bigger crack. An opening between the hundreds of other notes. We reached across the border, joining our hands in violation of the *mechitzah*. Together we pressed it in. Eyes closed. Prayers uplifted. God may she be healed!

We brought into our awareness other friends and family needing healing – and offered their names also in prayer. From around the world. Jewish prayers are focused here. Let our offerings be for the good!

Amidst the crowded scene of women and men of all ages and dress, predominately praying from *siddurim*, prayer books, some with tears in their eyes, some with head scarves, or not, some with back hats, *kippot*, or not. We backed away and turned to leave, each on our side, to rejoin again in the larger plaza.

Movement caught my eye. Above me, along a raised walkway, people were walking towards the usually closed gateway – the opening to the upper plaza, the park of many names, the Temple Mount area, the Al Aqsa Mosque/Dome of the Rock area was open! For five hundred years under the jurisdiction of the Moslem community leaders, only occasionally was it open to the public.

Wow, how unusual. On this holiday of Memorial Day I had thought there would be shoulder-to-shoulder security soldiers in the area. Instead, this elevated walkway and doorway entrance to the sacred area was open, inviting us, a silent beckoning.

Would it be appropriate for us to go there? On this particular day? We thought deeply for a moment.

Of all the pain, all the suffering that has come between Jewish and Moslem peoples. Perhaps this is an opportunity for peacemaking.

Perhaps bringing Sarah Leah's *kvittel* is ushering us through a gateway of new possibilities. Perhaps an angelic messenger is calling us forward. Are we open and ready to receive? To say Hineini, I am here, to be more fully present, to be of service, to follow where we are being guided to? To raise up our consciousness, our beings, to arise to the place of the Holy Rock. Are we ready? Will we do this? We are a little scared.

Yes, we will see where it leads. The doorway to faith is in transcending fear. We backtrack through the Jewish Kotel security gate and get in the other, shorter line. Bags are checked, passports shown, we walk up the ramp, towards the open doorway. Hundreds of Jews are praying right beside and below us. The ramp scaffolding is draped in blue and white, Israeli flag colors for tomorrow's Independence Day celebration.

Steadily we walk forward. A little nervous, a little curious, a little prayerful.

Vy he erev, vy he boker, and there was evening, and there was morning, our last day.

Never in our wildest imaginings did we think we would be going here today. Here to the Temple Mount. Where the holy Temple once stood. Here to the Dome of the Rock, where stands the rock where Abraham nearly sacrificed Yitzhak, the rock where Mohammed ascended in his Night Journey on the white horse, the rock that was the altar spot of the Holy of Holies.

Here, to the Al Aqsa mosque and plaza, where thousands of Moslems bow in prayer each Friday. And where ugly demonstrations and clashes have occurred, with both Jews and Moslems in the wrong.

This site is considered by many to be the center of the conflict. Or the center of potential peacemaking. The site where some Jews say will be built the 3rd Temple. For now it is a temple in our hearts.

We walked through the doorway. The gate was open. No charge today. A special entry ticket from an angel, we thought. We entered the vast and expansive plaza and took a deep breath. A little uncomfortable, or unfamiliar, we sought to get our orientation. A man approached us – "tour guide, tour guide – you pay me to show you around?"

We weren't quite ready for that. We needed to use our own senses, our own sensibilities, to gauge what we were seeing and experiencing through our own lens. In all these years, traveling to Israel since 1979, we'd only been up here a couple of times before. Long ago, maybe 15 years ago. In between the intifada tensions.

The upper plaza is vast and beautiful and spacious. Clusters of Arab men were sitting, learning and talking under the shade of old olive trees. People were wandering about, both tourists and Moslem folks en route to prayer. I imagined other times of the distant past, with Jews, sitting and learning and talking, en route to prayer.

The spaciousness of the site catches your attention. Nowhere in Jerusalem is there such a large open expanse dotted with trees, and gardens and holy sites, and so much room to contemplate.

Your vista is expanded. The sky is talking. Nothing is higher up than you are, on the top of this holy mountain, at the center of the world.

In silence, we meandered a bit in awe. No one talked with us, but we felt safe enough. Our eyes scanned the area and it seemed OK. I was feeling out the exits though in case we needed to leave in a hurry.

Yitz had taken off his kippah, but my bright red cap made us look like tourists, instead of a Jewish rabbi strolling around. Jews and Christians are not permitted to visibly pray here, in order to minimize potential conflict.

I remembered being there in 1998 or so, with Yitz and Talya and Noah Siegel and Shira, our youngest daughter. She and I spent part of an afternoon during women's prayer time sitting outside sketching up there. These paintings are a result of that special day. A group of young giggling girls gathered around us and we shared drawing pens and paper. Art became a common language.

We removed our shoes and walked inside the mosque and the Dome of the Rock. With reverence and appreciation, we quietly absorbed the sanctity of the spaces. The mosque was almost empty, covered in colorful prayer rugs, with beautiful light streaming in the front towards the east. The Dome of the Rock was filled with women, clustered with teachers, facing Mecca. The tall walls were adorned with magnificent mosaics, reaching far up to the dome. A pungent smell of animals, or humans, filled the air. And in the middle, larger than the size of this sanctuary, was the Rock. Rugged, wrapped in plywood fencing, stood the Rock. Naked. Craggy. Simple. Powerful. Bold.

Then I came to see it. Today I would only encircle its perimeter. Now I was searching for wisdom, for commonality, for sharing. How could our peoples live in peace and share this holy sacred spot? How could each learn to appreciate each other's traditions and attachments to shared religious sites?

Yitz and I wandered past a circular fountain surrounded by stone stools and realized it was a foot washing station. Shoes are removed to enter mosques. We Jews wash our hands ceremonially. Moslems, they wash their feet.

Yet in my distant memory, I remember foot washing too. I think it was High Holy days at TBI in the mid to late-1970s. Jack Brenner, a Levi, with a silver cup. He washed the feet of the Kohen's – Sam Sacks, and Avraham Fred Manela and maybe George Cahn (may they rest in peace), perhaps Ben Pascal, before they approached the bimah at TBI for *Duchanan*, the Priestly Blessing for the congregation, on Rosh haShana. So, through this ritual of foot washing, we are indeed connected to this ancient shared ritual to prepare us to enter sacred space.

Like the colorful turquoise, white and gold mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, the afternoon became a mosaic of colorful experiences, echoing our whole trip, our conversations, our concerns, our passions. As we were not permitted inside this time, our feet made a pilgrimage, a circling *hakafah*, around the perimeter of the Dome of the Rock.

The Rock, the precious Rock, the Foundation Stone, the holiest site in Judaism. The spiritual junction of heaven and earth. Where is located a small cave, known as the Well of Souls. This is where we bring our attention today.

As shared in the Midrash Tanchuma of the Roman-era,

“the navel is set in the center of the human body,
so is the land of Israel the navel of the world...
situated in the center of the world,
and Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel,
and the sanctuary in the center of Jerusalem,
and the holy place in the center of the sanctuary,
and the ark in the center of the holy place
and the Foundation Stone before the holy place,
because from it the world was founded.”

According to the sages of the Talmud, it was from this Rock that the world was created, itself being the first part of the Earth to come into existence. In the words of the Zohar, “the world was not created until God took a stone called Even haShetiyah and threw it into the depths where it was fixed from above till below, and from it the world expanded. It is the center point of the world and on this spot stood the Holy of Holies.”

According to the Talmud, it was close to here, on the site of the altar, that God gathered the earth that was formed into Adam. It was on this Rock that Adam, and later Cain, Abel and Noah, offered sacrifices to God. This Rock is mentioned in the Torah portion today as the place where Abraham fulfilled God's test to see if he would be willing to go up to potentially sacrifice his son Isaac. The mountain is identified as Har Moriah in Genesis 22. It is also identified as the Rock upon which Jacob dreamt about angels ascending and descending on a ladder and consequently consecrating and offering a sacrifice upon it. The Rock upon which the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the First Temple. And the Rock upon which the High Priest offered up the incense and sprinkled the blood of the sacrifices on it during Yom Kippur services of the Second Temple period.

The Mishnah in tractate Yoma mentions a stone situated in the Holy of Holies that was called Shetiyyah, as had been revealed by the early prophets. From the earliest time, the Rock was regarded as the most sacred object on the mountain, and was associated with both these memorable events and with manifestations of the Divine Presence. And, the Rock is considered to have a feminine aspect, related to water and weaving, with a hollow cave beneath, known as the Well of Souls.

So dear friends, dear *hevre*, it is this Rock that we bring into our awareness today. This sacred spot from which all blessings flow. This sacred spot towards which we direct our prayers today, and all days. We gather here on Rosh HaShana, at our humble site, with our small symbolic Jerusalem stone imbedded in the rock base of our TBI ark, which has a Jerusalem rock story worthy of telling on another day. We join with our Jewish brothers and sisters from around the world, praying towards a sacred stone in the heart of Jerusalem, surrounded and adorned by a beautiful structure created by our Moslem brothers and sisters. And ask, what does it mean today to us? Are we listening to the Voice? What is our task of responsibility? What is our prayer?

Like the Navajo and Hopi tribes and other native peoples of the American Southwest, who share and revere and make pilgrimage to the sacred, mythic source of their creation story at Spider Rock, in the center of Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, we Jews also share and revere and make pilgrimage with other tribes, other cousins, Muslims and Christians, to our mythic center of our creation stories in Jerusalem, atop a hill, to a sacred rock, the Foundation Stone, Even HaShatiyyah, or to the nearest place to pray near it, the Kotel, the Western Wall.

How can we usher forth new thinking, and unjam the roadblocks of the minds and hearts to creatively explore new pathways to peace? Where the "Temple Mount" or "Al Aqsa Mosque plaza" become the shared "Holy Mountain Park." Where words and ideas that divide us, like security fence, the wall, settlements, refugee camps ... become collaborative actions of building and sustaining meaningful and respectful communities, with infrastructures to support a sense of security and wellbeing for all. Where hopeful visioning becomes the stepping stone for sustained actions of peaceful co-existence. Whereas Reb Aryeh z'l sang, "My house of prayer will be a house of prayer for all peoples."

We each have a special role to play in the unfolding of the dream of peace. Our day, our last day, flowed forward, down the steps into the dark and crowded Arab market place, winding past men playing checkers or lounging in their shops. The pithy smells of the meat stalls were pungent with odor. Little boys ran through the stalls. Little boys who would become young men praying at the mosque, growing older, taking their places in the shuk. What was their future as peacemakers? How is anything to change?

Just around the corner, the landscape of the Arab souk vanishes, and the Jewish street shops of the historic Cardo sparkle in the stone walls. Our legs were quivering with tiredness, and we settled into outdoor seats at a small café with yellow awnings, just around the back wall from

the newly rebuilt Hurva synagogue. The Spanish Torah scholar Nachmanides', after personal expulsion, emigrated here and began to rebuild the city with a synagogue on this site in the late 1300s. He wrote to his son, "When I arrived in Jerusalem, there I found only 2 Jews remaining living there after the destructions and expulsions. Only two. We gather on Shabbat to make a minyan with farmers from nearby fields." And so he began, in his elder years of his 70s, the task of rebuilding the Jewish presence in Jerusalem.

Are we so strong, so courageous, so dedicated, to do what is called for in our time? We recalled a powerful visit a few weeks previously, when our TBI group observed a creative Jewish-Arab school called Hand-in Hand. Bilingual teachers and staff beautifully bring forth the best in each student, cultivating the essence of transformation in each each K-12 child, as a seed of Peace. One of only 4 such schools in the country, 10 years old, and originated by a Portland, Oregonian, Lee Gordon, he has with Arab counterparts and bilingual teachers, fashioned a powerful educational model that transforms the underbelly of mistrust, and misinformation into a model of tolerance, understanding, curiosity and deep friendships among Jewish and Arab children.

TBI will have the privilege of hearing Lee Gordon speak at services here at TBI on November 18, and I hope you will join me in welcoming such a courageous and inspirational peace worker.

As our lunch arrived under the yellow awnings, I glanced across to a dark doorway only 30 feet away, with a sign saying: Jerusalem Independence Memorial. I get up from my pita sandwich and peek inside, gasping as my breath is taken away. The small dark entry is lit with trays of yahrzeit candles flickering next to a wreath, and on the wall you can make out the names of hundreds of Jews who died here, in the Old city, men, women and children, soldiers and mostly not, as the Old city of Jerusalem became the last bastion of resistance in the 1948 War of Independence. A colored, etched map on the stone wall indicated the lines of offence, defense, sites of incursions of the Jordanian army, the Israeli Army, the civilians. All here, within the gateways of the Old City. A deep and somber remembrance. Right here, where we were having lunch.

The pain of the struggle is made present and relevant. We arise from the café table and begin our route to the car. Inside the Hurva, young Chassidic men are studying text in the beautiful rebuilt sanctuary, with graceful curves, and the famous arch embedded in a new wall. Beautiful white stones, and vaulted ceilings and wrap around circular balconies give a panoramic view of the Old City rooftops. In the distance, not that far away, you can see the golden roof top of the Dome of the Rock, our place of visitation only a short while ago.

The guide here explains two challenging ideas: that the top of the rebuilt Hurva dome was created just a little higher, a meter or so, to become the highest point in the Old City, surpassing the top of the Dome of the Rock. And, that in his very ultra-Orthodox perspective, we are awaiting the day when the Third Temple will be rebuilt on the Temple Mount itself. These are tension points for contemplation, begging fresh ideas.

We wander a few short alleyways and drop into a tiny apartment of our friends, Emunah and Reuven ha Levi. Just up the hill from the Kotel, they daven daily and are living anchors here now. Serving God with joy, serving community, welcoming travelers. A humble abode in the heart of the Jewish quarter, they are hosting a birthday party and cake for Israel. 63 years old now, or is it 2500 years old? And so complex!

We live in this very special era. Let us not forget what it took to get here. The thousands of years. The pain and the suffering. The dedication, perseverance, the prayers. Our lives are the blossoms on the flowering trees of the Jewish ancestors. We are the ones so privileged to live in this time, that was dreamed of, yearned for, prayed about, fought for, died for, over so many years.

As Peter, Paul and Mary sing, "Don't let the light go out. It's lasted for so many years. Don't let the light go out. Let it burn through our hearts and our tears."

What is our responsibility? What is our role? That only we, as liberal, free Americans, with a lifestyle of multi-cultural diversity, living freely and peacefully, can emulate, model, help birth new directions in the complexities of the Middle East.

What is our "birthright, our duty?" As privileged Americans leading relatively luxurious lives, compared to the dominant refugees and immigrants that make up the Israeli population, who have suffered unbearable discrimination. How can we shape our lives to affirm our role and honor our ethical yearnings for peacemaking? How can we bridge the wounds of the Jews and the Arabs to embrace a new way forward?

Through the alleyways of the Old City, through Zion gate, pockmarked with bullet holes seared into the stones, we walked down the pathway on Mt. Zion to the car. Har Zion, how incongruous, the site of our prayers, and now, also a parking lot. Yes, there are simultaneous incongruities side by side.

We drove "home" for the last time, past the Begin Center, around the old train station, down Emek Refayim, filled with cafes and shops. Our time world was closing in on us. Still suitcases to pack. We turned on the TV and the news was transforming from somber to joy, from Memorial Day to Independence Day. As the sun had set, the Tel Aviv festivities were beginning. Fireworks and dancing. Speeches and songs.

Young Israelis of all colors of the rainbow – Ethiopians, Russians, Americans, Europeans, Yemenites, were parading flags of celebration. This magnificent place, these strong and vibrant people were celebrating our rights to freedom in a fantastic display of joy, strength and pride, not shown on US or global media.

Joy to be alive. Strong in self-worth. Proud of bold accomplishments in a short time of growth.

And yet, we know too, that this same day is marked by others as Al Nakba. The catastrophe. And they mark it in defiance, in sadness, in anger. How can we reconcile this? Are we listening for the voice to call us to awareness and action? To a new place, a new hope, a new direction?

Let us be courageous, strong, compassionate and wise. Let us follow the leads of such creative people as Lee Gordon of Hand in Hand, or Susan Sygall of Mobility International, bringing Palestinians and Jordanians to TBI last week. Or the Los Angeles Jewish, Moslem and Christian Cousins Club women's group. Or Kenny Helphand's landscape architecture student who renovated the garbage dump in Yafo, south Tel Aviv, into an outstanding park in the Arab district. Each from our own place, we can make a difference. In our circle of friends and family, in our community, and in the larger world.

We each have a special role to play in the unfolding of the dream for peace. When we are working together, we can live a new dream, find a path forward. Each of us, each in our own small way, has an opportunity to network, to envision, to make a difference. To lead a spiritual path, God challenges us to take responsibility in our own lives to act for peace. To break down barriers. To change our language and vocabulary. To honor the struggles and embrace the difficulties. To reach out our hands in faith, not in fear.

Soon may there be the day when the Sisterhood of Sarah and Hagar can bring their children together high up on the holy mountain, to the Park of Many Names. And, under the shade of the old olive trees, have a picnic, with pita and goat cheese and a shared bottle of water. And bring out the crayons, where the kids can paint rainbows of Peace.

Each of our souls has a purpose, a mission. Ordained by the Fountain of All. In the busyness of our lives, let us stay open to listen to the voices, the angelic messengers, who come to remind us, to nudge us, to encourage us on the direction of our soul's path.

Yes, let us listen for the angelic voices, being present, stepping forward, Hineini, I AM here. That we may use our time here wisely, that our hearts may be instruments for peace, in our homes, our community and the larger world.

Our responsibility, to ourselves, our local Jewish community, and the larger global community, is no less than all those streams of Jewish communities before us, and on whose shoulders we live. Let us bring our offerings, of our hearts and hands, as acts of courage, acts of faith, acts of compassion, as offerings and healings.

As we seek awareness of our spiritual direction and pathways to spiritual wisdom, may we all be blessed to follow the calling, to rise to higher consciousness, and pray at the Holy Rock, that our lives may be vessels for Peace, that we may use the days we are given to connect heaven and earth.

And so, at 2 in the morning, in the dark of night, on Independence Day, we drove to the Tel Aviv airport and left behind a piece of ourselves.

Vy he erev, vy he boker, our last day.