

## Eisendrath International Exchange – A High School Semester in Israel

Shabbat, February 11, 2005 – 3 Adar I 5765

*On this Shabbat, Mount Zion congregants, Charley Smith and Sarah Chiapetta spoke about their experiences in Israel with the Reform Movement's semester long study program. Sarah went in Spring 04 and Charley in Fall 04.*

*Below are the texts of their reflections.*

### **Charley Smith, 11<sup>th</sup> grade:**

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Wow, where does one start? Well the program, I guess. Both Sarah and I went on EIE, the Eisendrath International Exchange. It is a four month program in which you and others from all over North America spend time learning and living in Israel. You experience Israeli culture, learn Jewish history, and participate in Hebrew Class, Ulpan Style. For those of you who don't know, Ulpan means intensive Hebrew language studies. When classes are in regular session, you live in the Malon, hotel, area of, in the words of Paul Reichenbach, "Lovely kibbutz Tzuba, nestled in the Judean hills". During your stay in Israel you travel everywhere, and I mean it, from the most northern tip of the Golan Heights all the way to the southern most city in the homeland, Eilat. You sleep under the stars when you are trekking for seven days on the Yam L'Yam, Sea to Sea, hike and when you are on your Negev tiyul. You see the centers of Jewish spirituality, Tverya, Tzefat and Jerusalem. You are immersed in Israeli culture while you study all the same courses you would at your home high school in English. All in all, it's an unbeatable experience.

Before I went to Israel, I started to come up with ideas about what the experience would be like. I was sure of several things; first, that I would come back from Israel a more spiritual and observant Jew, second, that my Hebrew skills would become impeccable, third, that I would fall in love, fourth, that we would have so much independence and freedom we could do whatever we wanted, and finally that we would be staying just a cab ride outside of Tel-Aviv. Well, two out of five isn't bad, right? As it turned out, I came back just as observant a Jew as when I left, however, my reasons had changed. We didn't have nearly as much freedom as I expected, in fact, the running joke was that we had more freedom when we were at home and grounded. And remember how I thought we were just a cab ride outside of Tel-Aviv, I was *way* off. But I definitely am better at speaking Hebrew than I was, and I am sure I fell in love, in more ways than one.

There were also the expectations of how it would be when I returned home. I half expected everyone to forget me and I'd have to reintroduce myself to most of the school. Also, I expected to be way behind in school. In both respects I was wrong, all my friends remembered who I was, except that one girl who wondered where I was the past weekend because she hadn't noticed me at a party. In my classes, I was at the same spot or *miles* ahead of my regular high school courses, and I am taking advanced and AP, college classes. In fact, in western history I was so far ahead, that I had to switch into eastern history. So all in all, academically, I came out very far ahead, even my GPA went up!

So, people are always asking me what the most memorable experience was for me, and I've had a very hard time nailing that down, and I'm not even sure I have now, but recall a very memorable feeling. The most memorable feeling for me was the feeling of home

that I felt in Israel. For me, the Jewish people has been more than just simply a religious group, for me, we are what we were in the days of the Tanach, the days of the prophets, the Jewish Nation, an ethnic national group. So, when I arrived in Israel, I obviously felt right as rain. Within weeks, almost everyone was always yearning to return home as we were on our day and weekend trips, home to Kibbutz Tzuba. I mean it, during Yam L'Yam, when we were sleeping in a dry riverbed, and one of my friends was having a slight asthma attack, all of us were just saying how much we all wanted to go home. One of our madrichim, counselors, came over and tried to convince us that Israel wasn't so bad, and just to wait 'til morning, we all just laughed at him. He actually thought we had wanted to go home! We then explained that no, we just wanted our rooms back at Kibbutz Tzuba. He smiled and we all laughed and told stories around the fire until 10'clock in the morning, actually, that turned out to be a bad idea as we had a seven hour hike ahead of us, but we still look back fondly at that memory.

Another time when I realized how much Israel was home to me was right before we went on the Prague/Poland pilgrimage. Me and a few of my friends, Adam Ross and Sam Levine, we hanging out at Kibbutz Tzuba's pseudo-Chuckie Cheese's called Kif-Tzuba. We were talking about how excited we were to come back to Israel after Poland and whether or not we could tell people that it was second time in Israel when we got back. See, the three of us kept developing ideas about maybe running away to Yeshiva instead of coming back to the states. No but really, I think I cried more as we left Israel for Poland more than I did when we first arrived in Israel on the first day of the program.

Israel needs us and we need Israel. Whatever kind of support you give, it's important and Israel could not and would not survive without the Diaspora Jews. However, as these peace talks gain momentum, and there is that silver lining we have been praying for, for fifty years, maybe its time to start thinking about cashing in that passport to Israel money and making a little trip with the family. I love Israel, it's where I belong, and one day I will join the ranks of our brothers and sisters that fight bravely every single day for the country that is the true home of our nation, and I'm sure that when and if you go, you'll find that it is your home as well. There's a place for every one of us.

Finally, I want to express my thanks, Thank you everyone. Just 9 months ago I stood up here, in this exact same spot; I actually think I was wearing the same boxers. I was standing here with my peers, making a statement of faith, a confirmation into this community. When it was my turn to speak, I looked at the piece of paper with my speech on it, and I tried to read it, but all the words and sentences were swirling. So, I just looked up and started speaking. I talked about how I never really felt very close to Mount Zion, until my confirmation year. Well now I feel closer, because now I see we are more than just a religious community, we are a national group that assembles to do good works. We have a great community and we support Israel without fail.

### **Sarah Chiapetta, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade:**

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History is an amazing thing. You can judge it, reflect on it, and internalize it if you really want to. The problem with history though, is that all too often, people assume that since it is history, it must be left in the past. It may sound obvious, but one of the most powerful things one can do with history, is to learn from it.

When I spent a semester in Israel this past year, I learned from history in a way I never knew possible. As we traveled around the country, I studied the history of Israel and of

the Jewish people first-hand. I *stood* on the hill where David battled Goliath; I *sat* in the cave where Bar Kochba fought for his faith.

But it wasn't at those sights that I learned the most. During my semester, as I slowly changed from a fascinated tourist, to a conscientious citizen, I realized that what made this place so unique was the ability for history and life to coexist: to build off of each other, and to make each other better. During my trip to Israel, I learned how to make history part of my life.

When I first arrived, I quickly learned that one of the things that was so unique about the history of Israel was that it was everywhere; literally. During our first field trip to the old city, we were given some time to roam around the square. As my friends and I headed towards a nearby falafel stand, we walked slowly and carefully, examining every ancient stone in the ground, in awe of the years that any one of those stones held. As we dawdled along, we were suddenly startled by a whirl of young boys clad in kipot and polo shirts speeding through and over the stones that we held so sacred. The boys ran past shouting out remarks to one another, and digging in their pockets for a few shekels to buy an ice cream.

At first, I was astonished; these kids have no idea how lucky they are! They run through these streets everyday and don't even care that the very ground they walk on, is in itself ancient, and holy and a piece of this great history that makes up who *they* are!

I later realized that the kids didn't run over those stones because they didn't care about their history. In fact, it was just the opposite; they cared so much about their history that they made it a part of their daily life. By making their history a part of everything they did, they had a better understanding of what it really meant.

Sooner or later, we all understood what it meant. During our semester, we had the opportunity to spend a week in Poland and Prague. We spent the week walking through concentration camps and learning about the atrocity that had happened to our people less than a century ago. Much of it was surreal, the piles of empty suitcases, the ruins of the crematoriums, the end of the train tracks.

As we walked through Birkenau in a daze, our group stopped for a moment to admire a pond, the one piece of beauty that we could find in the dreary camp. But our thoughts were soon interrupted when our teacher informed us that this pond had been a pit of ashes, and that it had been filled with water later; only to keep the ashes from moving around.

When we finally got on the plane to go from Poland back to Israel, we were all emotionally and physically exhausted. The plane was silent on the way home, as all 66 of us were taking well needed naps. But as the plane began to make its descent into Israel, the mood suddenly shifted to a joy unlike any other.

When the plane touched the ground, all 66 of us clapped, sang and cried together, because for the first time we truly understood where we were. Our trip had been longer and harder than any of us could attest to; because we weren't just the 66 of us anymore. We were there for all Jewish people; religious or secular, Zionist or anti-Zionist. We were living proof that after all of the pain, and all of the hardships that the Jewish people had to go through, we were a success, we had finally returned.

The water we were going to see now was not the water covering our ashes, but the water of the Mediterranean, Kinneret, and Dead Seas. During the course of our semester we hiked from one side to the other of our land. In walking our land, we learned how much it meant that even through everything, we were here.

During my time in Israel, I also learned that it wasn't enough just to be here, to be stagnant in Israel. Life was going on all around me. As much as the people of Israel made ancient history part of their lives, it was clear that they were working just as hard to create a new history for themselves everyday. This hope for the future that seemed to be instilled in Israelis was synonymous with another thing: pride.

I never understood that kind of pride until Israel's Independence Day, Yom Ha'atzmaut. Our entire Kibbutz gathered for a great celebration. I expected your average Fourth of July style party: food, music, friends. Sure enough, that was all there: tables upon tables of every Israeli delicacy imaginable, traditional Israeli music blasting through the speakers, groups of people gathering in conversation. But beyond all that, there was something that I had never felt at any 4<sup>th</sup> of July party before.

The evening began with the youngest girls in the Kibbutz coming out and performing a dance in brightly colored costumes. After them, various other groups of children took the stage to perform their own dances. Next, an old projection screen was set up in the lawn, and they began a slideshow of everything that happened that year in the Kibbutz. The show depicted mothers holding their new babies, soccer teams with trophies, and families celebrating a child's birthday. I realized that the Israeli Independence Day was not only a celebration of the country, but a celebration of the Israeli people as well.

When the slideshow ended, I was startled as a sudden burst of colors emerged in the sky. Fireworks. They are an institution of the American Independence day, but to be honest, I was a bit surprised that this was how Israelis chose to celebrate their country. I figured that the sound that came from the fireworks was probably not one that Israelis were fond of hearing.

But as the colors glowed through the night sky, I understood that the sound of the fireworks was not scary to them because they chose for it not to be. Israel's Independence Day, and Israel's very existence are all about choice. Everyday, Israelis make a choice to create for themselves, their family, and their country a new and better life. The people there know that it isn't perfect yet; their country still has a long way to go, but everyday, through learning, teaching, and understanding, Israel is improving. I never felt so much pride than when I realized that *my* being there was a part of those improvements and of the visions for the future of Israel.

In the parsha, T'rumah, God gives Moses instructions to build an altar. However, God does not command that all of the people join in in bringing things for this altar. Instead, God only asks for those whose heart is so moved.

At this time, the Israelites are in a very difficult situation. Can their faith sustain in exile, without a temple? How can their hearts be moved if they can no longer see the connection to their faith?

Now that I am back home, I stand to face a similar dilemma. Can I really take with me everything that I have learned and gained even while half a world away from the place that taught me?

But I don't need to be in Israel in order to reflect what I have learned in my everyday life. And the Israelites didn't need to be at the temple in order to keep their faith alive. God did not ask for Moses to build the altar so that people would remember to practice their faith, but rather as a physical reminder of who they were, and a reminder that if their heart *was* so moved, God would always dwell among them.

Luckily for me, my heart *has* been so moved. My heart has been moved by an understanding of Israel, and even more so, by a lack of understanding. My heart has been moved by the idea of the grateful and hopeful life that can exist right in the ancient and sacred places where our people fought so hard to keep our faith alive.

Israel, like history, is an amazing thing. The stories and ideas are there for the taking, but they always leave something just out of reach. Something that only those whose hearts are that moved will strive to find. But with our history of struggle and of triumph, the Jewish people wouldn't have it any other way.

Shabbat Shalom