

MICHTAV M'YERUSHALAYIM
Resa and Rabbi Stanley M. Davids
November 7, 2006

The winter rains have started here in Jerusalem. They came quietly, without a heralding chorus of thunder claps or howling winds. The skies turned grey, grew heavier, and then with stubborn gentleness began the process of bringing fresh life to the parched ground. may b'racha these rains are called: the waters that bring blessing.

But there is also fire abroad in the Land. For the last several nights there have been mini-riots, blocked intersections and burning garbage dumpsters in the ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist, Mea Shearim section of Jerusalem. The inhabitants of Mea Shearim, whose clothing proudly proclaims their wearers' preference for 18th century Eastern European Shtetls over a modern Jewish state, are gearing up to protest the possibility of a parade of pride for gays and lesbians in Israel's capital city. The protesters have formed an alliance with conservative Muslim leaders in order to block the 'abomination,' and they probably will succeed.

Interesting how history repeats itself as anti-Zionist Haredim ally themselves with Conservative Muslims to fight against what is perceived to be a violation of the will of God – to which both sides claim exclusive access. It happened in 1948 as well.

Fire also burns at the very heart of the Israeli political establishment. The charges alleging sexual misconduct by Israeli President Katzav may in the very near future force the president to resign. The campaign to replace him is already well underway. Shimon Peres is in the running, though not officially and not formally. Despite his age, Peres still dreams of reversing his most recent political defeat (among many) when Katzav was an upset victor over him several years ago. Colette Avital, former Counsel General in New York, is making a strong run as well. No matter what the final outcome of the court process, the presidency has been diminished and soiled by all of the charges and countercharges.

And charges and countercharges also mark Israel's extraordinarily public effort to grapple with what went right and what went wrong with this summer's Second War in Lebanon. In order to restore stability to his once powerful coalition, PM Olmert has reached out to Avigdor Lieberman, head of the "Yisrael Beytenu" ("Israel is our Home") party, and brought him into the cabinet. Lieberman has in the past supported what many would call a racist and deluded policy of transporting Palestinians and Israeli Arabs out of Israel's sovereign territory. But he also embraces a pluralistic vision of Israeli society – though it seems that this pluralism is mainly intended for Jews only.

Several days ago, David Grossman, one of the triad of Israel's most widely read authors, a man of the left whose son was killed in battle during the most recent war, addressed a rally of 100,000 in Tel Aviv in the annual commemoration of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Grossman, emphasizing that he claims no special right to speak out just because he is a grieving father, nevertheless found a rich and powerful vocabulary to renew his passionate plea for Israel's leaders to pursue every possible initiative to bring a mutually respectful and fully secured and

just peace to the Middle East. But even as he spoke, battling continues in and around the Gaza Strip.

Viable solutions are not easy to discover. Resa and I find that for the first time in decades our political perspectives are moving in sharply different directions. One of us has plainly ‘had it’ with an Israeli government that seems unwilling to focus on doing whatever needs to be done to ensure that the Jewish State escapes the specter of the disappearance of the option of a two state solution – leaving what might quickly become an apartheid state. The other clings to the belief that statecraft can still find a way to bring Palestinians to the bargaining table with a desire at long last to reach a negotiated end to what has become a bitter, brutal and dehumanizing struggle. We leave it to you to figure out who believes what ...

Fire and water.

Resa and I left Israel in August just as the war was brought to a halt by a cease fire, and we then began our preparations for spending the High Holy Days for a second year in the Progressive Bene Israel congregation in Mumbai. We had made some very special friends last year, and we also were still driven by our own need to undertake a shlichut, a mission of service to the Jewish people, in a Progressive congregation affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism. We have had many years of highly satisfying professional involvement with the Jewish community, and we felt that this was a wonderful opportunity to ‘pay back’ some of what we received.

We were not disappointed. Our friends in Mumbai greeted us warmly; service attendance at all of the services we conducted and at the adult education classes we taught was much higher than last year. They knew us – and we were also better prepared to offer what it was that this 2000+ year old community felt that it needed. They know and recognized that Resa and I work as a team, and by the time that we reached Neilah at the close of Yom Kippur services, tears streaked many faces (ours included) as many members of the congregation hung around the hall in which we had been worshipping, reluctant to say goodbye.

Once again, there were powerful, unforgettable moments. One evening we met with six young members of the B’ne Menashe tribe – who claim to be descendants of the tribe of Menasseh from the First Temple period. Living in the jungles in the far northeastern corner of India, they had somehow preserved elements of connection to their Jewish origins. In appearance, they appeared to us to be closer to the Chinese than to the dark-skinned Bene Israel. Following conversions conducted with the approval of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate, some 200 of the B’ne Menashe will make Aliyah to Israel this November. The evening we met, I asked their permission to welcome them back as the children of our people by blessing them with the Priestly Benediction. An incredible privilege.

The best teaching opportunity arose by inadvertence. For whatever reason, the time listed in the Jewish Religious Union’s publicity was an hour earlier than it should have been. That meant that there would be a break of some three hours between the Musaf service and the Mincha and Yizkor services. So spontaneously, Stan asked if there would be those who would be willing to give him a 90 minute teaching block to fill the time. Some 25 people (25% of the attendees)

joined him in a circle in front of the Ark. Stan opened the Ark and spread out a Torah before the group—many of whom had never been close to a Torah – and so began an incredible conversation about the origins of Torah, how a Torah is written and the role of the Torah and Mitzvot in Jewish life. When we had to stop the class so as to allow the Mincha Service to begin, there were loud protests – music to a teacher’s ears.

Resa beautifully chanted parts of the services and the Torah and Haftarah readings. I devoted my first sermon to what was going on in Israel. I had not intended to focus an entire sermon on Israel in a community that has so many needs – but shortly after we arrived we heard quite strongly that there was significant interest. As we sought to understand what was going on, we began to realize that major changes had occurred in India since last year. Just 12 months ago, we were constantly being told how tolerant India was and how all groups respected each other. But following some recent horrific acts of terrorism (including a train bombing in Mumbai), there is a growing dis-ease regarding elements within the Muslim community which might be posing a threat to Indian stability.

We met on our own with 14 Jewish students (from 3 to 14 years of age) in the Sassoon School, founded and endowed by the Iraqi Sassoons who played such an enormous role in spreading Jewish life throughout the Far East. We were overwhelmed by the thirst for an understanding of their Jewish heritage that the students displayed, even as they have come to see themselves as the sh’erit ha-playta, the saving remnant, of a once powerful Jewish presence in India. Resa tried to encourage them to use their secular studies assignments as legitimate occasions for doing research into Jewish life (“If you need to read a biography, why not read about Golda Meir?”). Stan asked them to take upon themselves the responsibility of learning enough about Judaism so that – even as they learned about their heritage from their parents and grandparents – they could in turn transmit that living heritage to their own children.

And then there was our visit between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to southwestern India, to the ancient Jewish community of Kochi (formerly called Cochin). Kochi is a major shipping hub and was therefore a place where successive waves of Jews have come over the past 2000 years. Beautiful synagogues were built and a rich Jewish communal and ritual life was nurtured. But now there are fewer than 45 Jews left in and around Kochi. We sought out several community leaders and were enthralled by the stories they told. Sarah Cohen is in her 80’s; when her brother died two months ago, he was the last of the male Kohanim of Cochin. Sammy Hallegua, age 75, can chant each Sedra of the Torah by heart, and he also possesses an uncanny oral history of Cochin Jewry.

We visited a wonderful old synagogue building that was now a florist shop and an aquarium store, piled high with filth. We sought out the entrance to the sanctuary, pushed through a reluctant door, and in the midst of appalling decay we saw a wonderful carved wooden Ark door on the western wall, and a beautiful chandelier. A sacred remnant of that which was but is no more.

We were moved to tears by the decay and by a powerful sense of loss. We whispered the Shema’, and then made our way back outside.

All during this period, we found the hours (always – very late at night) to join in a wide variety of Hindu celebrations and religious festivals. We learned so much and experienced so much, guided by our friends – even as we felt the unbridgeable chasm of difference between Hinduism and Judaism. Magnificent temples, endless streams of worshippers, the bringing of gifts to priests, the frenzied dancing, the worship of untold numbers of different deities, stately elephants and dancing monkey gods, the all-embracing religious philosophy that somehow brings order and meaning to the lives of 750 million Hindus in India – and creates a setting in which vast, relentless poverty and illiteracy co-exist alongside of an economy that within two decades will be one of the most powerful economic engines on our planet.

We spent three hours at an elephant farm – a place where 70 elephants were being coddled, cleaned and trained to serve in temples throughout India. Resa helped scrub one elephant, and Stan found himself fighting off the powerful grip of an elephant's trunk. The mahout assured him that the elephant was just being playful. Right. We also spent time at a special school established to teach Hindu teens how to carry on the fascinating patterns of dance, music and design that are one of the most characteristic features of Kerala State, the area within which Kochi is located. The school's discipline was astonishing, as was the commitment to keep folk culture alive.

After Neilah, we took a week's vacation in northwestern India, in the state known as Rajasthan. We had a 30 minute ride on an elephant (#117; you might want to avoid him – he created several traffic jams by his stubbornness) up to the remarkable Amber Fort. And then as the highlights of all highlights, we spent two nights in a camel camp in the Thar Desert that borders Pakistan.

A camel camp. In a tent. In the desert. The camel camp is billed as a five star – and the quality of the personal service clearly earned that ranking, together with the magnificent swimming pool built on top of a very high sand dune. There was something like plumbing at the rear of each tent. We had to hike 100 yards in the sand to get to the main buildings, and each of us was assigned a personal assistant to tend to all of our needs. We took an incredible four hour camel ride into the desert (the two of us, our two camels, and our two camel guides), moving past peacocks and wild deer. Our safari ended at a large water hole with water buffalo, egrets and cows enjoying cool relief from the desert sun. Herds of goats and sheep were guided to the water hole by teenagers, one of whom was playing a flute. Our camel camp provided a seven course meal for us, served hot, in silver covered serving dishes, as we sat in a stone shelter at the edge of the water hole. One night, the night of the full moon of Sukkoth, we sat at the top of the dune, adjacent to the pool, and watched a huge Hindu festival play out down below us. Several thousand people were in attendance, and we watched as they arrived on motor scooters, jeeps, bicycles, camels and on foot. And on the last morning, Stan took an hour hike out into the sand – with his ever-hovering attendant.

We came back to Israel for Chol HaMoed Sukkoth, carrying with us several hundred photos that Resa had taken, as well as a sense of deep appreciation for India – a country that has as many faces as it does gods. On the last morning of Sukkoth, a Friday, we stood on our mirpeset (porch) and watched many of our neighbors walking to synagogue carrying lulavim, the special bouquet emblematic of the harvest festival. And then in the early afternoon, we joined the large numbers of those carrying home flowers for Shabbat. It is a beautiful, restful time. Friday evening was Simchat Torah and it seemed as if all of Jerusalem was prepared to dance the night away,

holding tight to Torah scrolls in one hand and children in the other. We wondered what Hindus might think about when they see the Jewish community engaged in a frenzied, joyous celebration of the text that unites Jews of all stripes and convictions across the world.

These last few weeks in Israel have been marked by the meetings that typically follow the holiday season. With the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency, Stan visited a Druze village right on the Lebanese border, and learned how the suffering of the Second War in Lebanon was shared by all of Israel's citizens. We also participated in seemingly endless conversations about how to renew the World Zionist Organization. There were also some interesting opportunities to see whether Reform/Progressive Judaism ought to seek out some more official and structured relationship with an Israeli political party. Stan spent five hours in the Knesset one day, meeting one on one with MK's, testing the waters.

And, of course, Resa extended her fabled hospitality to an ever-increasing number of guests – family members, students at the Hebrew Union College, ARZA and ARZENU leaders, and friends. There is something wondrous about the way that her culinary magic sets the scene for conversations that last long into the night – punctuated on Shabbat with song and prayer. Such gatherings in our home are among our greatest joys.

We leave on November 8th for Santa Monica, and the chance to spend extended time with our children and grandchildren. Stan also has a scholar-in residence gig in Toronto, other lectures around the country, ARZA and URJ meetings in Atlanta. We will be at Temple-Emanu-El in Atlanta on Friday evening, December 8th, as Stan has accepted Rabbi Schwartz's gracious invitation to preach. We await with incredible anticipation and joy the birth of Ronn and Nicole's child (b'sha'a tova – at a time of blessing) in late December. Stan also has some health matters that will have to be addressed in the midst of all of this, but we expect nothing but good results. He has been experiencing an as yet uncontrollable, full-time atrial fibrillation and the doctors want to try to restore his heart to a normal sinus rhythm. Obviously, he has not allowed this condition to interfere with either his political life or with his relaxation time!

We will be in the United States until late January – and we hope to be with friends and family in all kinds of happy settings. Please stay in touch.

With love from Jerusalem.

Resa and Stan
resa@davidsfamily.net