



*(Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, the Senior Rabbinic Fellow for JTS KOLLOT: Voices of Learning, is in Israel—teaching, learning and painting for the 2008 -2009 academic year. This is a regular series of letters from his travels.)*

**“A Bus Ride to Remember”**  
**Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz**

**February 3, 2009**

**A Bus Ride to Remember**

As many of you know, just after Hanukkah, Miriam and I moved our son, Adir, from the neighborhood school in which he was enrolled to another public/religious school in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. The reason for the transfer was the unacceptable level of violence in the school in which Adir was originally enrolled. Students in Adir’s class were making his life miserable. In response, Miriam and I initiated a meeting with his principal and teacher, both of whom were receptive but ultimately powerless to do anything about the situation. Violence is a serious problem in Israeli schools and just a few months ago, a front-page article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that some 30 percent of Israeli students had been victimized by other classmates. So we certainly were not the first to deal with this issue; and sadly, we will not be the last. One can only hope that the new Israeli administration about to be installed within the next month, will be more attentive to the need to make all Israeli schools more of a learning environment, infused with a sense of *derekh erez, menshlikhkayt* (decency and compassion).

With the help of some friends in Jerusalem, Adir secured an interview at a prestigious public/religious school (known in Hebrew as *mamlachti-dati*) in the Jewish Quarter. It was a perfect match. We had wanted Adir to be enrolled in this school from the beginning, but when we interviewed over a year ago, the principal told me that the school was just too crowded. The attraction of this school is that enrollment is capped at twenty-four students (as compared to a typical class size of about thirty-five). This school also has a fine reputation for its faculty and the families it attracts from all over Jerusalem: they cultivate a true learning environment. On being accepted, Adir’s demeanor changed dramatically from that of a dispirited nine-year-old to one that is smiling and enjoying his studies every day. Our only concern was that Adir would have to adjust to getting up at 6:00 every morning to catch a bus at 7:00. To his credit, he has not complained even once since he started in the new school.

This past Friday, I took advantage of an invitation from Adir’s bus driver and principal to come for a visit. Once Adir gave me the okay and said that it was fine with him, I welcomed the opportunity to see what his daily world was like. I boarded the bus with him at 7:10 last Friday

morning, truly not knowing what to expect. The thirty-minute bus ride turned into one of the most memorable trips of my life. Adir and I took our seats toward the back of the bus.

The driver, Chaim, took a circuitous route around Jerusalem as he brought fifteen precious passengers to this school in the Old City. Weaving through the German and Greek Colonies, up Katamon, and through San Simon, Chaim gathered the first bunch of kids. A little girl (six or seven) of Australian parents sat nearby and whispered something to Adir as she handed him a pile of shekels. I requested that Adir give the money back; Adir then explained to me that she asked him to buy a fruit roll-up for her in the local market (as she was too young to go into the market herself). Adir also explained that she usually asks another student on the bus, Benaya, to buy it for her. But in his absence, Adir was the next choice.

We wove around to another neighborhood, Givat Vradim, as the sun began rising over the city. We stood in front of an apartment building for a solid three minutes waiting for the next child to board the bus. I asked Adir if Chaim ever left a pick-up location without waiting for the student; he said there were a few times, but that usually Chaim is patient. Another young child by the name of Moshe boarded the bus with a backpack that appeared to be three times the size of him. As he climbed on the bus, Chaim said, "Moshe, I understand you had a birthday yesterday. Did you save me a piece of cake?"

As he drove along his route, turning down Shai Agnon Street, Chaim turned to all the kids on the bus and asked if they know who Shai Agnon is. One raised his hand and proudly responded that he was an author who won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Chaim commended the young boy and began to share stories of Agnon with the kids. At the next stop, in Nahlaot, Chaim picked up three children as one of the parents handed him a cup of coffee. In a moment of exuberance, Chaim said the blessing aloud—"shehakol niyehveh b'dvaro"—over his coffee and the children on the bus responded, "Amen!" We turned to the last leg of the journey as the bus wound down through Mamilla and up to the Jaffa Gate; the bus snaked around a perimeter road of the Old City and dropped the kids off at a parking lot in the Jewish Quarter. As I departed, I thanked Chaim and assured him that I had never experienced a bus ride like that in the United States. I felt good about the decision Miriam and I had made—and I hadn't even set foot inside Adir's class yet.

The rest of the family continues to do well: our daughter, Rachel, is now having full conversations in Hebrew; our other daughter, Shira, who is now more than fourteen months, is walking at a rapid pace; and Rabbi Miriam is hard at work on translating her book, *Taking the Plunge*, into Hebrew. We have had the great pleasure of hosting JTS cantorial and rabbinical students in our home for Friday night dinners and, this Wednesday evening, we are hosting an end-of-semester celebration for JTS students who are studying at the Schechter Institute. The political race in Israel is heating up as Israelis get ready to go to the polls in just about a week to choose a new prime minister and members of the eighteenth Knesset.

Please continue to be in touch and let me know how you are doing

Thinking of all of you here in Jerusalem,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt".