

**November 24, 2008**

**In the Middle of the Action**

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Dear Friends,

This past week and a half has been full of visitors, important meetings, and meaningful encounters. United Jewish Communities (UJC) held their annual meeting in Jerusalem this year, so many of those involved with Federation came to participate. In at least one way, Israel feels like South Florida—at some point everyone visits!

Last Thursday, I had the pleasure of lunching with Joanie Levin, one of my students from Jacksonville, Florida. In addition to being an advocate for and supporter of The Jewish Theological Seminary, Joanie Levin has spent a lifetime investing herself in the Jewish community of Jacksonville and making frequent visits to Israel. She has even made it a priority to study spoken Hebrew. In all that she does, she is an inspiration to me and the Jewish world. Joanie graciously invited me and Rabbi David Lazar (from north Tel Aviv), one of the most creative, passionate, and dynamic rabbis of the Masorti Movement in Israel, to join her for lunch on Emek Refaim. Rabbi Lazar, who has been an extraordinary pioneer and representative of the Masorti Movement, spoke to us about some of the challenges and opportunities facing his community and the Conservative Movement. He regularly visits with children in the Israeli public school system to give them a substantive sense of Jewish identity; without his visits the students would have little or no connection to Jewish tradition (apart from learning the Bible as history). Moreover, Rabbi Lazar has reached out to the gay and lesbian community in Israel. He is a passionate *shaliah* in all that he does and it was a privilege to spend time with him and Joanie.

Last week, our family traveled to Ranaana to spend an amazing Shabbat with Roger and Lisa Gladstone and their family; Roger and Lisa are originally from Boca Raton. Involved in both the Conservative and Orthodox synagogues in Boca, Roger and Lisa found themselves on a spiritual journey that ultimately brought them to Israel. Opening their home and hearts to us, they shared the many rich aspects of their new life in Ranaana—from their outgoing and well-educated children to their warm synagogue community (made up of many American, Canadian, British, and South African *olim*—the first time I have been honored with an aliyah since arriving in Israel) to Lisa's incredible culinary skills to the many *divrei Torah* offered around the table. They are an inspiration to us as models of the unlimited potential for growth in one's Jewish learning and commitment.

This past Sunday, I had the privilege of meeting two of my finest Boca Raton students (and chairs of the upcoming JTS dinner at Congregation B'nai Torah, Boca Raton), Emily and Dr. Stephen Grabelsky. Emily and Stephen represent the best of young, engaged Jewish leadership. Lovingly involved in the Jewish community on so many levels (the Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Federation, and JTS to mention only a few), Emily and Stephen contacted me so we could spend a couple of hours together in the Old City of Jerusalem. What touched me most about their request is that they wanted to combine their sightseeing experience with Jewish learning.

We met just outside of the Jaffa Gate (Emily and Stephen traveled from Tel Aviv just for this time together), and we began by reading Psalm 122 ("our feet stood at your gates, Jerusalem . . .") and a modern Israeli poem by Yehudah Amihai about the miracle being not the ancient

stones but the living people on their way to buy vegetables and living in an independent Jewish state. From there, we journeyed along a path weaving through the Armenian Quarter, down into the Jewish Quarter, along the Cardo, and then onto the Western Wall. Overlooking the Kotel and the Dome of the Rock, we said a *l'chaim* together over some delicious Israeli wine and walked down into the plaza. On the way to the Kotel, we bumped into another familiar face from Boca Raton, Nicole Katz, yet another remarkable, young, and dynamic leader from the Boca Raton Jewish community. Nicole was one of a number of young people who founded Congregation Shaarei Kodesh in Boca. We all reconnected standing before the Kotel; being there together gave our connection a new depth and strength.

On Monday, I participated in a General Assembly program sponsored by the Wexner Foundation. Comprised of three leadership programs (the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program, which trains and enhances the professional leadership of the North American Jewish community; the Wexner Heritage Program, which enriches lay leadership in North America; and the Wexner Israel Fellowship, which selects a group of Israeli leaders working in the public sector and brings them to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard), the Wexner Foundation has been a pioneer in many cutting-edge ideas and programs. Hundreds of Israeli and North American delegates participated in this first-of-its-kind encounter.

With the help of volunteers from its three leadership programs, the foundation produced a film in which its alumni from North America and Israel were interviewed on a variety of topics: What is Zionism? How are we to understand the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora? What sorts of conversations should we be having today and in twenty-five years? Gathered around tables and guided by a facilitator at each table, the conversations triggered by the film were real, rich, and refreshing. Our table spoke about the need for a more mature conversation between the Israeli Jewish community and the North American Jewish community. One extraordinary Israeli leader who has been a passionate voice for equality in Israeli society and religious pluralism spoke poignantly about the issue of nonrecognition of Conservative and Reform rabbis and Judaism by the religious establishment in Israel. Painting a picture of the huge number of challenges facing Israeli society, this leader remarked that "American Jews need to fight for their legitimacy in the State of Israel and, specifically, the legitimacy of their spiritual leaders." In fact, this individual also proposed that American Jews should cease their giving to Israel until their rabbis and movements are recognized and respected as part of the full spectrum of Jewish identity in Israel. While I do not agree with halting American Jewish donations to Israel, I agree with the emotion behind it.

We, as American Jews, should not be afraid to speak up. We need to speak thoughtfully, passionately, and creatively—and engage in meaningful two-way dialogue with our Israeli family. No member of our family should be de-legitimized, nor should any member of the family be favored over the others as the only one "preserving real Judaism." Perhaps Israel can even learn from us about successful educational models and attitudes of pluralism.

I am very curious to hear your reactions and responses. As we move into Kislev, the darkest days of the year, I wish you many blessings of light from Torah, family, and community.

Thinking of all of you here in Jerusalem,

Matt