



*(Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz is on a year long leave of absence from the Florida JTS office. This is the first in a regular series of letters from his travels.)*

July 16, 2008 – Jerusalem.

Dear Friends,

We truly cannot believe we are actually here, in Israel! What a journey.. everything wrapped up at the house about two minutes before we left to head to Miami airport -- packing and arranging to the last minute (but I guess that is to be expected with three children). The van was filled to the brim with our worldly possessions as we said our l'hitraot to Boca Raton and all the very special people that have comprised my rabbinate over the past nine years. In fact, some of them stopped by giving us a welcome break from the chaos of packing; and one couple brought over a magnificent dinner from Grilltime with every appurtenance you could imagine -- at that point we were furniture-less in the house and they brought a card table with linens, chairs and even a set for the children so they could enjoy their dinner as well. Miriam and I were just overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and support over our weeks of saying good-byes and packing. It was all very touching, tearful and meaningful, making us realize the impact of serious Jewish learning and community; The Jewish Theological Seminary has given us all a gift in KOLLOT: Voices of Learning.

All went smoothly once we arrived at Miami International and the kids were getting more visibly excited about our year-long adventure. Rachel was bragging to everyone about going to Israel and Adir began recalling some fond memories of past Israel trips. The flight gave way to even more excitement as the kids befriended another family on the plane that was also coming to Israel for the year. And Shira was adopted by a lovely Israeli family sitting in the row behind us. Every time Shira expressed any dissatisfaction, the family was there to smile and sing to her. It quickly reminded us of a very special spirit found in Israel -- that Jews truly relate to one another as family -- for good and for bad. Children are the national treasure and take priority over all else; and everyone feels they can give you unsolicited advice on how to take care of your child (experienced it again today as I was shopping for some fruit in Mahane Yehudah -- three people were concerned about Shira looking uncomfortable in her stroller!)

We arrived at 10am this morning (Israel time) -- breezing through passport control and baggage claim. Yair Medina, who managed my Passover Landscapes project in Jerusalem, surprised us by showing up at the airport to welcome us, embrace us and give

us his blessing for a wonderful year. We were shepherded into a minibus with all our luggage and an hour later found ourselves in Jerusalem. Once we set down our bags, Adir and I had a shopping expedition at Jerusalem's open air market -- Mahane Yehudah. Adir was mesmerized by the sights and smells of the market; and the whole energy of the place -- pointing out everything from fish heads, to chicken feet to the sack of plums that he set his eyes on . . . We had a Hebrew lesson on the way to the market -- Adir has already begun to expand his vocabulary. And he asked when would be the next time in the market -- I think he also wanted some chocolate rugaluch!

Of course, our joyous arrival was juxtaposed against the return of the two Israeli soldiers, Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser z"l. The sorrow seemed to permeate the streets; a sense that an entire nation and family was participating in the sorrow of the Regev and Goldwasser families . . . a dear rabbinic colleague by the name of Rabbi Peretz Rodman once shared with me his take on experiencing life in Israel. He compares it to, of all things, The Wizard of Oz -- specifically, the moment at which the movie transitions from black and white to technicolor. That image has always stuck with me whenever I return to this magnificent and miraculous homeland of ours . . . the verve of life and reality of the rebirth of the Jewish people is here and now; it is something for all of us to treasure, experience, and most importantly, we must continually remind ourselves that we live in a time of one of the greatest miracles of Jewish history.

Love from Jerusalem,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent initial "M".