



A Week of *Kibbutz Galuyot*: The Ingathering of Exiles

Rabbi Matthew L. Berkowitz

Dear Friends,

In the daily prayer known as the *'Amidah* (or *Shemonah Esrei*, the prayer of “eighteen”), one *brakha* (blessing) in particular stood out in my mind over the course of this past week the prayer recited for “the ingathering of the exiles.” The blessing reads: “Sound the great *shofar* of our freedom. And raise up a miracle to gather our exiles. Gather us together from the four corners of the earth. Praised are you God who gathers the people of Israel from the far reaches.” In every respect, our footsteps over the past week have been witness to the fruition of this blessing. Jews from France, Florida, and Florence have made me more conscious of the words I say three times daily. Living in Israel is animating my words of prayer in ways I could only have dreamed of from afar.

Over the past two weeks, our family has had the privilege of living on Rehov Bezalel, a street that borders a neighborhood of Jerusalem known as Nahlaot. This neighborhood is best known for its proximity to Mahane Yehudah, the open air market. But richer and tastier than all the delicacies the market has to offer is the community to be found in this charming and culturally vibrant setting. Jews from Aleppo, Kurdistan, America, France, Iraq, Persia, and North Africa have all found homes in this very special place. Monday of this past week, Miriam and I ventured out to visit a very special artist by the name of Eliyahu Sidi. I had the privilege of meeting Eliyahu and his wife, Yehudit, in their Ein Kerem home some two years ago. Since then, they have moved to more comfortable quarters in Nahlaot.

Eliyahu is a remarkable artist. He illustrates in the spirit of *Shalom of Sfat* seizing on rich excerpts of sacred text and illuminating them with colorful, vivid brushstrokes. Most notably, Eliyahu has focused his work on illuminating Mishnah. His work represents dialectic between the text of a particular mishnah and images that evoke feelings of humor, joy, thoughtfulness, and love. Eliyahu was born in France four years before the start of the World War II. His father was from Bulgaria and his mother from Vilna and, together, the family survived the war by hiding in various places in the center of France. After a few years in Israel in the 1950s, they returned to France, but Eliyahu always longed to return to Israel. After the Six Day War, Eliyahu went back and stayed for good. He has not left Israel since that homecoming in 1967. For decades he lived in Ein Kerem in a single-room house facing the Beit Zayit valley. Eliyahu and Yehudit told us how

heartened they are by the sense of Jews returning home after two thousand years. Eliyahu said, "Every single moment that I live here, in the modern State of Israel, it is a miracle. This is what we have prayed for a homecoming of the exiles and here I am living a dream."

As I found myself reflecting on Eliyahu's words, I bumped into one of my finest students at the corner of King George Street and Agron Dr. Mitchell Levine. A talented orthodontist and community leader, Mitch recently became the president of the Jacksonville Jewish Center, an honor that is well deserved for this very special person who has devoted himself to the local Jacksonville Jewish community and beyond. I had the honor of getting to know Mitch and his family some four years ago during a Jacksonville Federation Mission to Israel. And, in fact, it was that experience that inspired my involvement in the JTS Missions to Israel in 2005 and 2007 and, now, the upcoming 2009 trip. Mitch came to Israel this summer for the sole purpose of learning at the Conservative Yeshiva with two of his daughters. He told me about some of the challenges of learning, and learning almost entirely in Hebrew, as his face radiated great joy from the experience. My soul mirrored Mitch's elation as I delighted in his presence here in Jerusalem.

Then, Thursday afternoon, I had the privilege of teaching at the Conservative Yeshiva. When I studied in Jerusalem some fifteen years ago, there was no Conservative place of learning to understand classical Jewish texts. Today, the Conservative Yeshiva, under the auspices of United Synagogue and academic auspices of JTS, attracts some of the finest students and faculty from all over the world. My former and beloved teacher from my rabbinical school days in Jerusalem, Rabbi Richie Lewis, invited me to give a class on Parashat *Hashavua*' (the weekly Torah reading which was *Mattot*). About twenty students gathered late on a Thursday afternoon. About six of these students came from Europe—Prague, Paris, and Brussels—and two of them said they had decided to come and learn at the yeshiva for a year because they knew nothing of their Jewish heritage. They wanted to be in Israel and in an intellectually vibrant place. We studied the "weight of words" through the parashah's opening legislation on vows and the close of the Torah reading, which addresses the apportionment of the Cisjordan to the Gadites and Reubenites.

Thursday evening we were treated to a very special dinner with Rabbi Joel and Beverly Mishkin of Temple Beth Sholom in Sarasota, Florida. Joel, one of our most active and vibrant rabbis, who devotes his rabbinate not only to creating a beautiful community on the west coast of Florida but also to deepening his community's involvement with JTS, is in Israel leading a congregational mission. The evening gave us a chance to reconnect and review the many JTS activities taking place on the West Coast of Florida in the coming year.

Shabbat morning we took advantage of our location in the center of town and wandered down to the Italian Synagogue on Rehov Hillela street parallel to Ben Yehudah. In every which way, davening at this synagogue is an experience of *kibbutz galuyot* (ingathering of the exiles). First of all, the physical space itself was imported from Italy. A gift of the

Jews of Venice, an entire synagogue was sent to Israel and reconstructed as a gift to their community's *olim* (Italian Jews who migrated to Israel). Secondly, the customs at this synagogue are different from both Ashkenazic and Sephardic rites. Every single word of prayer is uttered aloud in an Italian chant that inspires one to imagine what life must have been like as a Jew in Rome, Florence, or Venice. And, in fact, when the participants are not speaking Hebrew, Italian is the language heard from every corner of the room. Adir and Rachel attached themselves immediately to a group of children helping to assemble the kiddush for the community (no doubt, they had their eye on the chocolate rugulach and the mushroom bourekas). And Miriam and I reconnected with the owner of a wonderful Italian restaurant in downtown Jerusalem known as Agas v'Tapuah (Pear and Apple), which is highly recommended as the owner of the restaurant serenades the customers like Pavarotti and serves the freshest pasta in all of Israel.

From France, to Jacksonville and Sarasota, to Italy and beyond, Jerusalem feels as if it is truly the center of the world. May it always be the center of the Jewish world; and may it always attract such remarkable people. We are living in a miraculous period of Jewish history; we are the witnesses to and participants in *kibbutz galuyot*

Love from Jerusalem,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word.