



Dear Friends,

Many of you have written and asked me to share some more personal experiences of our family's transition to life in Israel. In this installment of "Reflections," I will try to paint a picture of our adjustment. I welcome your feedback on these missives from Jerusalem and am heartened that so many of you are reading them. I invite your questions and comments and am delighted to continue this very special connection with all of my students.

A move to any other foreign country would involve a sense of being uprooted and a long period of adjustment to the culture of that country. For Miriam and me, returning to Israel feels much more like a homecoming than a painstaking transition. We both spent four years here as students, and since we are not officially *olim* (immigrants), we have been spared much of the interaction with the various bureaucracies (tax, banks, mortgages, customs, driving license) that many newcomers find frustrating and discouraging. We have easily resumed relationships with old friends, and our feet remember the shortcuts all over town, our favorite shops, where to find a minyan for *Minhah*, which streets smell like jasmine when evening falls. We are also discovering new activities, particularly kid-centered places, parks, and festivals.

We revel in the rhythm of Jewish life that permeates the air of Israel: especially the sense you feel on Yom Shishi, Friday, that the entire nation surrounding you is preparing for Shabbat. The bustle of pre-Shabbat shopping, especially in Mahane Yehudah, the open-air market, is intense. Even people who are not religious use Friday to clean their steps and balconies and get together with friends and family. We see people dressed in white shirts streaming down the streets to various shuls, tons of people strolling and speaking French, English, Hebrew . . . we have a sense of common purpose. Not just a family or community, but a whole people is welcoming Shabbat.

Our children are definitely experiencing much more of a transition. Adir spent the first three weeks at sports camp, which he loved. Most important, the camp was taken on a special *tiyul* (trip) each week. Adir's favorite trip was to the City of David, where they walked through the water tunnel and sifted through mounds of dirt searching for artifacts from the Second Temple period! He is not excited to begin school, since he knows it will be a challenge to keep up with the Hebrew in classes much larger and more chaotic than in his intimate Schechter school in Boca. But he will rise to the challenge. We meet his anxiety with humor and encourage him to have an open mind.

Children are very much at the center here, perhaps a symbol of hopes for the future. Israel often feels like an extended family, and many people are willing to "chat" with Shira on the bus and offer advice when she falls asleep in the stroller and her head tips to the side. She enjoys our walks in the morning and evening, she loves to look around and take it all in. It is very hot during the midday so we have quiet time at home. She explores the toys in the family room, watches Adir and Rachel invent games, and is almost standing on her own.

Rachel is eager to start *gan* (preschool) next week and meet more kids, but she has enjoyed excursions with us and the new palette of foods. This week Miriam took the kids to Ein Yael, a living museum built on an authentic Roman village. They spent hours doing ancient crafts, making perfume, baking pita, weaving, constructing a flute, feeding donkeys—even milking a goat!

So much of life here revolves around children, nature, and connections to roots. Miriam went to pick up a friend's daughter at a bat mitzvah and was astonished how different it was from a typical American celebration. It took place in the countryside about twenty minutes from Jerusalem in a small outdoor restaurant, with religious girls dressed casually in cotton skirts, some even in plain T-shirts, flowers and herbs on the ground since the restaurant was also a *mashteilah* (nursery), a small square-dance floor with music that was not too loud, and a horse peeking his head over the fence. The girls loved the food, friends, and dancing, and Miriam loved the simplicity of it all.

Lest you begin thinking we have discovered the Garden of Eden here, think again! Israel, like anywhere else, has its difficult moments. The toughest and most trying encounters thus far seem to take place in the bank, supermarket, or post office wherever one encounters the frustrations of Israeli bureaucracy gone awry. When Miriam and I walked into a bank just off of Emek Refaim, hoping to open a checking account for the year, this simple errand turned into an exercise in extraordinary frustration, unbounded patience, and much humor.

To begin, we stood with our two daughters in a cramped waiting area while we waited for the next available customer service person. Though it looked like there were about ten available agents, the bank manager claimed that only two particular women could open a bank account for us. As they lingered on interminably with the customers sitting in front of them, the “line” grew. Since there was no sign-in sheet or place to take a number, people guarded their place in the imaginary line with great vigilance. Given the rising level of frustration at the lack of any movement in this bank lobby, I had the sense that chaos, if not a fist fight, lurked around the corner. To add insult to injury, the bank clerk pulled out a bag of Bissli (think Israeli Fritos) and began crunching away. Though any bank manager in America would have been appalled by this worker's behavior, this manager not only looked the other way but started doing the same thing. We did finally get to speak with the agent, but only after getting into an argument with a man who pushed his way in front of us. Miriam lectured this man on his lack of manners an important lesson in how much you have to stand up for yourself in Israel. After all that we decided against opening an account, as the monthly fees for depositing, withdrawing, transferring, and simply having the account was apparently designed to be a steady drain on the customer's balance.

And then there is the post office. My first time on this trip visiting an Israeli post office, I was pleasantly surprised by the apparent efficiency. I thought, Israelis were finally learning a lesson in civility: when I walked in, I immediately noticed an orderly system for taking a number, sitting in a lounge, and waiting for the number to be called. I took my number, waited ten minutes, and when it came time to buy my stamps, the clerk told me she could not sell me the overseas postage that I had requested: only one clerk in the post office dealt with that, and I would need to wait specifically for her. Why did they not have a sign saying that? Two days later, I walked to our neighborhood post office with our daughter Shira strapped to me. When I arrived there were two people ahead of me and two agents in the post office. One gentleman trying to ship about fifty pounds of books to the States was driving the poor clerk crazy; the other person had relatively simple business. When my turn came, the next available clerk got up to take a coffee break, and I wanted to pull my hair out. The other clerk finally got around to taking me and when she did, she

too reported that she could not fulfill my request for stamps to the United States. Only the other clerk could take care of that . . . and then she was out of stamps! For this we waited two thousand years to return to Zion?!?!?

How about the taxi driver screaming the recipe for pickled eggplant to his niece through the speaker phone, without the slightest bit of self-consciousness. (yes, you add a lot of garlic, and it lasts in the fridge for 4 days).

But then there are moments when you really understand why you are here. There is a Turkish synagogue diagonally across the street from our apartment. As we ate dinner one night, the minyan gathered for *Ma'ariv* and the kaddish echoed across the street into our apartment. At first Adir thought the loud noise was due to some unrest in the neighborhood. I wish you could have seen the smiles on our faces when he realized what it was and, together with Rachel, responded "Yehey shmey rabbah mevorakh lealam ulalmay ulmayah" (May God's name be blessed and sanctified forever and ever). On a Friday afternoon I found myself in the hospital with Rachel (she is fine now), and, concerned that we would be stuck there over Shabbat, two rabbis came over to Rachel's bed, giving us two challot and inviting us both to Shabbat dinner in the hospital. (By the way, Rachel pointed out the Jewish stars to me on her purple sheets compliments of Hadassah Hospital.) Or when Adir and I crashed a wedding in the Old City. We stood a few feet away from a magnificent huppah and joined in singing the *Sheva Brakhot* with all assembled. Adir had a special twinkle in his eye and begged to get just a bit closer he wanted to stand near the flutist.

Each day is an adventure and we are happy to share it with you. If you plan to be in Israel this year, please let us know!

Thinking of all of you here in 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.