



Rosh Hashanah: A Sweet New Year in the Sweetest of Cities

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Dear Friends,

Two days before Rosh Hashanah, I was walking home from the Yehudah Ha-Levi School along Ruth Street and down Yehoshua Bin Nun with our nine-year-old son, Adir. I mention the names of both Adir's school and the streets on which we walked because of their significance to Jewish history and the lives we lead today. All three of the namesakes were heroes in the Jewish experience: Yehudah Ha-Levi for his poetry of the Golden Age of Spain and for declaring, "My heart is in the East but I am in the far reaches of the West . . ."; Ruth, the caretaker of her mother-in-law, Naomi, wife of Boaz, and the great-grandmother of King David; and Yehoshua Bin-Nun, the successor to the greatest of all prophets, Moses, who led the Israelites into the Land of Israel.

I asked Adir about a special Yamim Nora'im (High Holiday) program in school in which the rabbi gave a *devar Torah* about the topic of *teshuvah* (repentance). Much to my surprise, Adir was able to give me an extensive summary of the rabbi's words, almost verbatim. That was just about the greatest Rosh Hashanah gift Adir could have given me. After only a month of school, Adir's Hebrew language skills have improved exponentially. Both in comprehension and in speaking, Adir is becoming more and more comfortable with each passing day and, on a scale from one to ten, he even rated his school a "five." It doesn't sound all that impressive but as Adir pointed out to me, "Abba, on the first day of school it was a negative fifteen!" We have come a long way in only a month.

On that same walk home, Adir noticed something else. About six times on the way home from school people greeted each other with *shanah tovah u'metukah* (a happy and sweet new year). He commented on this to me with a generous smile from ear to ear, adding that he had never heard anything like that in America. It is this sense of normalcy that has always enchanted me when I am in Israel.

Living in a Jewish state is a remarkable experience, especially during the Jewish holidays. More than that, it is truly a miracle. One senses all around the preparations for the holiday season. Perhaps it is, on some level, similar to what Christians feel in December a sense that wherever you go, the holiday season has come upon us all.

For Adir, this was a completely new and overwhelming feeling. I sensed that it was the first time he was feeling what is to be "the majority." For the holiday season was no longer limited to the confines of his home or family or local synagogue community: an entire nation was now celebrating with Adir. Commercials on the radio ended with wishes for a *shana tovah*; advertisements in the streets were filled with good wishes for a year of health and prosperity; and jars of honey, ruby-red pomegranates, and crisp apples could be found everywhere. Erev Rosh Hashanah, Adir and I purchased about a dozen jars of gift-wrapped honey and delivered them to friends in the Baka, Arnona, and German Colony neighborhoods. Adir's good feeling happily continued.

Over the two days of Rosh Hashanah in Jerusalem, we rejoiced in the feeling that the entire world was

celebrating with us. As sundown came on Monday evening, traffic in Jerusalem came to a near standstill. That first night, our family was invited to the home of a lovely couple in the Abu Tor neighborhood. We had met Marcel and Jana soon after Miriam and I were married twelve years ago. It was remarkable for us to see their children all grown and pursuing graduate degrees. Marcel grew up in Paris and Berlin and Jana grew up in Prague. After Marcel served as a rabbi in Switzerland for a number of years, the couple decided to make *aliyah*. He explained why by saying that “Jana and I looked at each other and, together, we had to answer the question ‘where is home?’ The answer was so obvious: we came to Israel.” All three of Marcel’s and Jana’s boys served in the Israel Defense Forces and, today, Marcel owns a bookstore in the heart of Jerusalem and Jana works for the Jewish National Fund.

After candle lighting, we all walked to a small, Ashkenazic synagogue called the *Beit Knesset Har Refaim* (the Synagogue of Mount Refaim) as opposed to Emek Refaim. We were packed together in a modest space as the *ba’al tefilah* (prayer leader) began to chant the Rosh Hashanah evening prayers in the familiar tunes. When we returned to Marcel and Jana’s home, we were joined by their nephew, Jonas, from Berlin, and two cousins from Boston. Marcel gave a beautiful *devar Torah* on the multiple meanings connected with the Hebrew word, *shanah*, which we typically translate as “year.” In addition to its obvious meaning, it is also connected to the Hebrew expressions “to change” and “to repeat.” “Every year,” Marcel taught, “we are given the gift of either changing our ways or repeating them. The challenge is to realize the gift we are given and to take advantage of the precious opportunity.” Adir listened carefully.

The following day, we were treated to the call of the shofar coming from multiple directions. Just about whatever time of day it was or wherever we were, the call of the shofar was not far away. Adir noticed each time the sound echoed from every corner of a Jerusalem radiating with the glow of an autumn day. Every call, however, was unique, reflecting the *ba’al tekiah* (the shofar blower) and the community from which it emanated. Every moment here is a precious gift; and every day another treasure. And this Rosh Hashanah, we were blessed to observe Adir as he discovered this truth for himself.

G’mar Hatimah Tovah from a Jerusalem of Gold,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt". The signature is written in dark ink and is centered below the text.