

Rosh Hashanah 5782
Reconnect to Israel: Go, watch, listen
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shanah Tovah!

How do you say "Darn It" in Hebrew? I wondered as I considered my unfortunate fate. 10 years ago my wife Laura and I were traveling in northern Israel for Passover. It was Friday, and we knew that stores and restaurants would close in the late afternoon for Shabbat. Well, checking out the art in Tzfat took longer than we planned, and we got lost on the drive back. By the time we reached a Supersol grocery store to buy food for Shabbat, it was closed. So was everything else.

And then the car's low fuel light came on! At least the gas stations were still open, so we filled up. I stayed outside fretting, while Laura went inside to pay. She returned to the car carrying a plastic bag and said, "Look inside."

Inside were two delicious-looking, mouth-watering, gourmet prepared sandwiches. Fresh vegetables and sliced cheese on a fresh Kosher for Passover baguette.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, gazing upon it like a life-saving oasis in the desert.

"Inside," she answered, "I also got us chocolate cake."

"No way! I got to see this!" I hurried inside. Let me tell you: the inside of this random gas station mini-mart in nowhere-ville, Israel, had so much fresh and delicious Passover food that it felt like walking into Abt Electronics for the first time. There was a whole aisle just for Passover sweets and desserts. I stepped out and yelled to Laura waiting at the car: "Honey, should I get us a bottle of wine?"

Rak BaAretz - Only in the land of Israel. Only in Israel could Passover be so deeply ingrained that even *gas stations* contain aisles of Pesach foods - that actually look appetizing too.

Rak BaAretz. Only in Israel. If you've ever been to Israel, I bet you have one or more *Rak BaAretz* moments. What is it? Was it spending Shabbat in Jerusalem? A moment at the Kotel? Dancing in the streets for Yom Haatzmaut - Israel's Independence Day? Memories with friends on a teen trip? Bonding with family on a family trip? Bumping into

somebody you never expected to on Ben Yehuda Street? Seeing the sunrise at Masada? What is your *Rak BaAretz* moment?

This past pandemic year was deeply challenging for all of us for a hundred different reasons. But for those of us who love Israel, it was even more so. Let's be honest: it was a really tough year for Israel too. There are several reasons why we might feel more distant from Israel this year than in the past. Not necessarily, but possibly.

Today I want to acknowledge these events briefly. But I then want to reaffirm why it's vital to strengthen our own personal connections to Israel in 5782. Finally, I will share a few ideas as to how we can reconnect here and now with our Jewish homeland. This High Holiday season prompts us all to recalibrate our goals and priorities for the year ahead. Let 5782 be the year we reconnect with Israel.

To be sure, I'm not accusing anyone of a lack of commitment. But like relationships with a spouse or significant other are dynamic, ours with Israel might be too. However often we think about Israel, we may have felt some distance this year. First, very few of us could actually travel there because of the pandemic. Next, we endured another bruising round of government elections. Former Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu's corruption scandal was distressing. Then in May we witnessed the 11 day explosion of violence between Israel and Hamas. Of course Israel had to defend its citizens from 4000 Hamas rockets, but there was tremendous suffering for both Gaza Palestinians and Israelis. We also saw Arabs and Jews violently attack each other in parts of Israel proper. Those days were agonizing.

Some of these moments may have led us to feel less connected to or less proud of the Jewish state. However, for precisely this reason at precisely this time, it is vital to remind us all why caring for Israel remains an urgent priority.

There are many reasons why I love and support the Jewish state; today I will only share three. First, as a *Jew*, I know that Israel is the only place in the world where we Jews control our own destiny. For two thousand years, a Jewish community's fate rested in the hands of local rulers, who were frequently hostile toward our people. Israel is the only place where a Jewish majority votes, legislates, and holds national political power. Israel is home to a Jewish army to protect its citizens and Jews worldwide. Israel is the only place where a true Jewish culture flourishes openly - in literature, art, film, television, music, dance, cooking, and more. Israel is the place whose schedule is set by Jewish time. Where Jewish holidays are national holidays. Israel is where we can

truly build a society grounded in Jewish values and ethics. I forget who noted it, but Israel is the place where thousands of years later, the same people are worshipping the same religion in the same language in the same land. That is breathtaking.

Second, as an *American*, I hold dear the ideals and foundational values of the USA, starting with democracy. And Israel remains the only true democracy in the Middle East. Only Israel offers its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens freedom of the vote, freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly. Free government elections are genuine: At this very moment, a key part of Israel's governing coalition is an Arab Islamist party, Ra'am! Now *that's* democracy in action.

Is Israel perfect? No, it is not. Israel has room to improve in many ways. Real inequalities exist in Israel, and these should be addressed and corrected. And *Israelis themselves* are the first to articulate these. But I love Israel nonetheless...just like I love Chicago, which is far from perfect. Just like I love America, despite its own deep flaws. Just like I love my high school, my college, and my hometown, though they're not perfect either. *Nothing* we love is absolutely perfect...except for my wife! Did I tell you the story about this one Passover at a gas station...?

Third, speaking *personally* just as Alex, Israel has been the setting for many moments that mattered to me. I had amazing family vacations there. It's where my best friend from 4th grade Uri lives. One of my favorite summers was my Camp Ramah teen trip. Israel is where I had my first real taste of independence, when I spent a gap year there after high school. It's where I discovered I wanted to be a rabbi. I ran my fastest half marathon in Israel. I attended the most amazing and inspiring Shabbat services in Jerusalem at Klali, where Lecha Dodi features a new tune for each of 9 stanzas - lasting 25 minutes in all. *Rak BaAretz*.

Israel is where I attended the most incredible concerts, like Ahinoam Nini - or Noa. Get excited, because she's coming to Beth El this winter. It's where I discovered the singular music of Idan Raichel. Later a friend and I brought him to our university for a concert. After the concert, I asked my friend out on a date...and now Laura and I are married with three kids. Israel is where she and I then lived for our first year of marriage, which is why Jerusalem is the center of our Ketubah. Israel is personal for me. I simply cannot tell my life story without mentioning it again and again. And I know many of you feel the same way.

How can we recapture Israel's magic from Chicagoland? How can we strengthen our connection here and now? Remember these words: Go, watch, listen. Go, watch, listen.

First and most important, *go* to Israel. Start planning your next visit there, ideally within two years. Whether you last visited two years ago or 22 years ago, *soon* is the perfect time to visit again. With Israel's high vaccination rate, it will be safe to visit when things open up. Go with your family. Go with your friends. Or go with Beth El! Our synagogue is planning a community trip to Israel a year from this winter break. There might be one sooner, as well. Join us! Whoever you go with, just *go* to Israel.

Second, *watch* Israel on your TV. Never before has it been so easy to see Israel from our homes. On Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other streaming platforms, we now have access to high quality Israeli films and TV shows. This is not simply entertaining but *significant* because we can peer into authentic Israeli life and hear native Hebrew, with the help of subtitles. We can *feel* like we're there by watching "Shtisel," "Srugim," "Fauda," "Beauty and the Baker," and more. It is astounding how in-demand Israeli TV is now on the international level. Just search for Israel in the search box and enjoy. As always, our Beth El library offers a terrific collection too. Just *watch* Israel.

Third, *listen* to Israel. Wherever you get your podcasts, check out those that highlight Israel. Whether you like to follow Israeli news, political commentary, feature stories, Torah from Jerusalem, the Israeli tech sector or something else, you will find podcasts to meet your individual interests. Or listen to Israeli music. It is exciting, unique, and full of energy. It's a taste of Israeli culture delivered straight to your headphones. If you use Spotify or something similar, search for Israeli music and enjoy. You'll be connecting to Israel in a very real way. Just *listen* to Israel. Go, watch, listen.

Watching Israeli TV and listening to Israel news or music may *seem* incidental. But they are not, because tuning into Israel on a regular basis is *paramount*.

Today my voice rings loud and clear: reconnect with Israel, our unparalleled Jewish homeland. I know most of you agree with me: The recent Pew report says "A large majority of U.S. Jews (82%) say caring about Israel is either 'essential' or 'important' to what being Jewish means to them." But there exist other voices that are openly hostile toward Israel and in some cases challenge Israel's right to exist. Unfortunately, these voices are growing louder, especially during and after the violence in May.

You all face the following choice: do you listen to the voices of Joshua and Caleb, or to the voices of the ten spies?

I refer to the Torah's story of Parashat Shlach Lecha. The Israelites have left Egypt and are headed toward the Promised Land. Moses sends out 12 leaders to scout out Canaan, as he assumes that the spies will return with a glowing report to boost everyone's morale. But the plan backfires horribly. The spies return with two distinct reports. 10 spies warn the Israelites that they stand no chance of survival against the daunting enemies. By contrast, Joshua and Caleb defiantly respond that they can and should ascend with confidence - for God is with them. Tragically, the nation listens to the 10 spies. G-d punishes the entire generation by barring them from entering the Promised Land. They listened to the wrong voices. *They lost out on Israel because they didn't believe in Israel's potential.*

The Torah says something unusual in describing the scouting mission. The verse says "וַיַּעֲלוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד־הַחֲבָרוֹן" (Nu. 13:22). Literally this means, "they went up to the Negev and he came to Hevron." Here is the problem: One Hebrew verb is plural while the other is singular. It should be consistent: *they* went up to the Negev and *they* came to Hevron. But where teachers see grammatical errors, the rabbis find wisdom. Rashi clarifies: *The spies* went up to the Negev and *one man* came to Hevron. Presumably this was one of the good guys, Caleb. He alone went to Hevron to visit the Tomb of the Patriarchs, for which the city is famous. *He* alone went there to connect to G-d's promise to Abraham. It was a promise which began long before him, but whose realization Caleb was now part of. As the Etz Hayim Humash says, "He alone was able to see the land not only as it was at the moment, but as what it had meant and would mean in terms of G-d's promise to the Patriarchs."

The same is true with us. Like Caleb, we must look toward our past and realize that Israel's promise is thousands of years old; its potential brims with unlimited possibilities; and we too have a direct role to play in its story.

My voice today is that of Joshua and Caleb. I hear them speaking to us: "Go. Explore. Come closer." We must reconnect and rediscover Israel for ourselves. We must return there to experience more *Rak BaAretz* moments for ourselves and our descendants.

(I want to pause and say the following: whatever your take is on Israel, even if it's not mine, I'd love to hear your voice on this important subject and have a conversation. Just send me an email and we'll set it up.)

We've all had a tough year. Israel has had a difficult year. But the High Holidays are the time for renewal, the time for Teshuva - of return. Of spiritual return to G-d. Of emotional

return to our best selves and to restored relationships with other people. And this year - I hope - of renewed emotional and physical return to Eretz Yisrael. Go, watch, listen.

Listen. I am reminded of the famous song "*Al Kol Eileh*." If you want to feel Israel's power from your home, after the holiday go on Youtube and type in "*Koolulam Al Kol Eileh*." The link will be in Thursday's email. It's a *Rak BaAretz* moment from your couch, hearing 12,000 Israelis sing it in beautiful harmony.

May 5782 be the year we not only sing these concluding words of the chorus but experience them ourselves:

השיבני ואשובה
אל הארץ הטובה

Bring me back and I will return / To the good land.

Shanah Tovah!